I. Show and Tell

Go ahead, Peter, James and John. Savor the moment for just a second. It won't be like this again, this side of glory.

Who would have thought you'd see this when Jesus took the three of you apart and climbed up the mountain? Here you are, though, and what a sight to behold. Jesus is transfigured before you: He is radiating light.

Jesus is not alone. Moses and Elijah are both speaking with the Savior; and from the Gospel of Luke, we know what they're talking about. They're not sharing war stories with the young Man. Moses isn't telling Jesus how he faced down Pharaoh and led the people out of Egypt. Elijah isn't recounting his battle against the 400 prophets of Baal or raising the young boy at Nain from the dead or his ascension into heaven by whirlwind and chariot. It would be silly for these two men to be telling Jesus about these things: Long before He was born to Mary, He was there with them.

Moses and Elijah aren't talking about themselves: They're talking about Him. They're speaking of His departure, His exodus by way of the cross the cross. All the prophets pointed to Jesus, and these two aren't stopping now. They stand on the mountain only to demonstrate that Jesus is far greater than they, that He is the Son of God.

God the Father confirms it from a cloud of glory above. "This is My beloved Son," He declares. "Hear Him." There is no doubt: Between the radiant light, the ongoing prophetic work of Moses and Elijah, and the testimony of God Himself, there is no question that Jesus is the long-promised, long-awaited Savior.

Put your trust in Him, Peter, James and John; and savor the moment, because too soon it's over. There's no time for building tents; suddenly the light and the cloud and the prophets are gone. And as you leave that mountain, it's all downhill from here. In more ways than one.

From here, Jesus goes to the cross. Simple as that. There will be some miracles along the way, but nothing like you saw on that mountaintop. You'll see Him continue His life of perfect love and service, and you'll see Him arrested, beaten and tried. You'll witness betrayal, you'll know terror deep inside. You may well deny Him yourself before that night is over.

That's not the worst: The next day He'll be on the cross.

At such times, it would do you well to heed the Father's command at the Transfiguration: "Hear Him." Listen to what the beloved Son has to say. Appearances and circumstances change all the
time, so hear Him—the Word of the Lord stands forever. If you listen between now and the cross, you'll hear Him declare that it is His Father's will that He suffer, die and rise again. But you won't listen then, and you'll be terrified on Good Friday.

Of course, Jesus rises from the dead anyway, because His will doesn't depend on how well you've listened. You'll have the joy of that Easter Sunday, and you'll have forty glorious days of His incarnate presence after that. Then, He'll ascend into heaven, promising His presence in His Word and Sacraments.

And what then? What will happen to the three of you, sent to preach the Gospel to all nations?

James, you'll be the first to go. Before the book of Acts is halfway through, Herod will have your head. Between arrest and executioner, what will you be thinking then?

Peter, you'll last longer; but Scripture tells us you face your share of suffering and persecution along the way. Tradition tells us that your life ends cruelly as you're crucified upside down. Where will your comfort be?

John, your life will be the longest - but is that such a blessing? You'll have to endure the exile to the island of Patmos, witness years of persecution and suffering in a dying world. You'll write letter after letter to the Church, telling Christians to be patient and endure. What will sustain you and your faith year after year after year?

Savor the moment of the Transfiguration, gentlemen. But more than that, hear Him. Listen to His Word, because that will be your faith and hope and comfort. Great moments only last moments, but what is said remains. Your eyes that saw the Transfiguration will not always see good things; but the Word of the Lord endures. And the Word made flesh will raise you from the dead.

Hear Him.

And so you will. It is no surprise to us that, later on when Peter writes about the Transfiguration, he'll mention the glory, but he'll dwell on the Word. He writes:

17For He received from God the Father honor and glory when such a voice came to Him from the Excellent Glory: "This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased." 18And we heard this voice which came from heaven when we were with Him on the holy mountain. 19And so we have the prophetic word confirmed, which you do well to heed as a light that shines in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts; 20knowing this first, that no prophecy of Scripture is of any private interpretation, 21for prophecy never came by the will of man, but holy men of God spoke as they were moved by the Holy Spirit. 2 Pet 1:16-21

Translation: We saw the glory, and we heard the Word. You don't see the glory, but you hear it—the Word is your light. God speaks through the Scriptures. Find Him there. Hear Him.

Nor should it come as a surprise that, when John writes his portion of the Scriptures, he always dwells on hearing Jesus. His Gospel begins, "In the beginning was the Word." His first epistle starts out, "That which was from the beginning, which we have heard..." (I John 1:1)
So it is with the apostles: They are not sent forth to show God's glory, but to tell of it. Displays of glory in this world are seldom seen-and glorious moments last only a moment. Ah, but the Word of God endures forever. The promise of forgiveness for the sake of the crucified Christ doesn't go away. It is why the Father's words to the three disciples ring out to you and me, too.

Hear Him. Hear the beloved Son.

II. Between Transfiguration and Resurrection

I'm just guessing, but I'm guessing that you're not on a mountaintop right now; all things considered, joy is not particularly easy to find. There's plenty to worry about. There's all sorts of ways to avoid happiness and remain captive to worry and gloom. If you're not on the mountaintop, you're in the valley of shadows-including the shadow of death.

Reading the newspaper is enough to raise your blood pressure. Our brave new civilized world is on the brink of war-a war far away, or maybe not. Friends, colleagues and family members are called up to active duty. At issue are weapons of mass destruction, where a suitcase of this or a tablespoon of that could wipe out a city the size of Boise. That knowledge doesn't make for a good night's sleep.

Life is relatively safer in Idaho, where our version of dangerous weather is the inversion. Safer, sure; but hardly worry free. There are still traffic accidents and random acts of violence close at hand. It's a city mired in political scandal while more than 1000 employees are laid off locally in a week's time; the ripples in the economy are just beginning to be felt.

Of course, there's always the state of the Church. Attendance seems to be dropping in any Christian denomination. Our synod currently suffers an internal struggle that continues to deepen and divide. This doesn't make for sound sleep and restful nights, either.

Entertainment these days is hardly going to help your quest for holiness. While newspapers skip substance to dwell on sensationalism, networks compete to produce the grittiest, most violent, most immoral fare that the censors will let them get away with. It's a long way from "Be holy, as your Father in heaven is holy." And if you're a parent with kids in the house, it's not going to get any better as those youngsters grow up.

That takes care of the world, the region, the city, and the culture. Now we talk about you. No matter how hard you try to rise above, you're going to make mistakes along the way; some of them will be big enough that the consequences and shame will last a long time. Words you shouldn't have said, things you shouldn't have done, doctrines you promoted because they seemed good at the time. You're going to make mistakes. No one is exempt. Everyone has scars.

Need we mention that none of us are getting younger, as your doctor might be telling you? Your personal variation might be increasing fatigue, a loss of vision, narrowing of the arteries or some mutant cells growing where they shouldn't.

This is the trouble you face-assuming you have a perfect family, minimal debt, no intrusive relatives, former friends who've changed or fellow employees who are out to get you.

Somehow, I don't think that "Don't worry, be happy" is going to cut it. With all that you see, joy can
be hard to come by.

That's the point—in these latter days, life can look pretty grim; and the current world situation makes it especially so. You'll have the mountaintop experience every now and then: But glorious moments only last a moment, and then you're back in the valley of shadows again. It's wearing, grinding, exhausting. It chafes at your faith and taunts you that, with all you see, God cannot be found.

But remember the Transfiguration. Despite the glory that Peter, James and John could see, the Father didn't say, "This is My beloved Son. See Him." He said, "This is My beloved Son. Hear Him."

Hear Him. Hear and remember the promises of God—because that is where He is found.

Hear the Word of the Lord from Mark 13: "But when you hear of wars and rumors of wars, do not be troubled; for such things must happen, but the end is not yet. For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. And there will be earthquakes in various places, and there will be famines and troubles. These are the beginnings of sorrows" (Mark 13:7-8). While this is not particularly pleasing news, it is important news all the same: Some would suggest that the world's condition is proof that God doesn't exist, or at least doesn't care. This is far from the truth: The Lord declares to you that all of these troubles will, and must, happen. The absence of these troubles would call God's Word into question; the presence of these troubles only confirms His truth. But their presence does not at all prove that God has no love for you.

Instead, you have much proof that God does love you, for so He promises.

We begin with this promise: "God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, not imputing their trespasses to them, and has committed to us the word of reconciliation" (2 Cor. 5:19). Are you in the world? Yes. This means that you are included in this reconciliation. Christ has died for the sins of the world, and Christ has died for your sins. And if you are forgiven, then you have the Lord's favor.

So how do you know that this forgiveness, which has been won for you, has come to you? The Lord makes this certain promise to you, too.

First, He uses these words: "I baptize you in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost," and He promises that you are thus baptized "for the remission of sins," and so you receive the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:38). It's not just the water, but the Word. It's His promise. In your Baptism, hear Him.

Second, He says to you, "I forgive you all of your sins." He does so by means of Holy Absolution, as we spoke of last week. Time and time again, He declares His forgiveness to you in His Word; and in declaring it, He gives it. He promises that this is so: "[My Word] shall not return to Me void, But it shall accomplish what I please, And it shall prosper in the thing for which I sent it" (Is. 55:11). Hear Him. Hear him speak those words of forgiveness, because there He gives you that forgiveness.

Third, He speaks again: "Take and eat, this is My body - Take and drink, this is My blood - for the forgiveness of sins." It's not just a meal where we gather together. It's a meal where the Lord is present, feeding us with Himself in order to forgive us. You have His promise spoken every time at that Supper. Hear Him.
So you have the promise that the Lord has reconciled you to Him by His death on the cross. You have His promise that He comes to you and forgives you your sins. And if that is the case, then you have all of God's gifts for you.

Are you worried by what you see-anxious about the world? The Lord promises, "In the world you will have tribulation; but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world" (John 16:33). The Lord who has overcome the world has all things under His feet. He shares that victory with you when He forgives your sins. You don't see it yet, but you will: The Lord promises. Hear Him.

Do you grieve divisions within the Church, where false teaching seems at times to gain the upper hand? The Lord Jesus Christ declares that He is the foundation of the Church; and it is He promises the gates of Hell shall not prevail against it" (Matt 16:18). The Church, always under attack, often looks to be near death; but she is the bride who lives forever, because Christ has died to make her His. So He promises: Hear Him.

Do you suffer from guilt? The Lord has borne your guilt to the cross and destroyed it there with your sin. You still feel the pain for now, but the Lord declares that those days are numbered: "You shall eat in plenty and be satisfied, And praise the name of the LORD your God, Who has dealt wondrously with you; And My people shall never be put to shame" (Joel 2:26).

And to all His people, who face death because of sin, He promises, "I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in Me, though he may die, he shall live. And whoever lives and believes in Me shall never die" (John 11:25-26).

Glorious moments only last a moment, and for now your eyes will see much sorrow. While you do not see the Lord Jesus in this valley, you still hear Him. You hear Him promise you redemption and forgiveness. You hear Him promise His presence and help-that He is with you always, even to the end of the age. You know these to be true, because you hear Him promise: You are forgiven for all of your sins in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen