

**“Main Features And Coming Attractions”**

In the name of our transfigured Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, grace to you and peace.

As those of you who are movie buffs know, next Sunday evening are the Oscars and so that means Sharon and I are doing what we normally do in February, and that is to try and see all the movies that have been nominated for Best Picture. Much easier when they only nominated five, much more difficult when they now nominate nine or ten. Pretty well all of you know the drill of going to see a movie on the big screen, even if its been awhile. You go into the movie theatre, find a seat that's suitable, clamber over some poor innocent slumbering in the aisle seat, taking pains not to step on toes or lose your balance. You find a place for your coat, sit down, get ready to watch the movie on the big screen. Same for theatre, or concert. What the big screen has, that live theatre doesn't however, is the preview of coming attractions, a brief glimpse of the highlights of a movie opening soon. The movie makers and theatre owners hope the preview will pique your interest enough to make you want to come back and see the whole film.

On the Mount of Transfiguration, Peter, James and John, the inner circle of Jesus disciples, were given a preview of coming attractions. And today, on the Festival of the Transfiguration, so, too, are we – a splendid preview of Jesus radiant in divine glory, his mortal nature brilliantly though only momentarily transfigured, a dazzling preview of his divinity, unalloyed and perfectly pure, shining in glory like the very sun. A sneak preview, in other words, of Easter, the triumphant climax of the epic love story between God and humankind.

But like the preview in the movie theatre, this is not the movie that is showing today. It hasn't opened yet. It can't be seen in its entirety. Only a glimpse to arouse interest and stimulate curiosity. Those whose interest is piqued will have to wait, will have to come back.

Peter, for one, thinks that's a punk deal. This is the big picture he's been waiting to see. He's viewed enough of the melodramatic healings and documentaries featuring Jesus the teacher. Peter's recent confrontation with Jesus over the rabbi's depressing talk about rejection and suffering and dying is still fresh on his mind. His soul still stings from the master's words. "Get behind me, Satan, for you are not on the side of God but of mortals." Peter wants no more of that kind of talk, no more of that kind of picture. He wants action, big, bold, spectacular. This vision on the mountain, with Jesus, Moses, and Elijah in celestial conversation, this is more like it. No, not like it. This is it! This is what he had hoped for ever since he dropped his fisherman's nets and hitched his wagon to the rabbi's rising star.

"Thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory" will soon become "Mine is the kingdom and the power and the glory" if only these giants of the faith will let him hang out with them. So naturally he offers to build three booths, three dwellings – it's a way to prolong the moments to forget the main feature about to be played out and jump ahead to the coming attraction he and the others are here previewing.

"Once, in a conversation with a colleague, I observed that this story suggests an appropriate name for a church. "You know," my friend replied in agreement, "now that you mention it, I don't think I know of any Transfiguration Lutheran Churches." Which, of course, was my opportunity to tell him I grew up at Transfiguration Lutheran Church on the mountain in Hamilton, as far as I know, the only Transfiguration Lutheran Church I know.

"But I wasn't thinking of Transfiguration Lutheran Church," I said in conversation with my colleague about the Transfiguration story in the Bible, "What I had in mind was Three Booths Lutheran Church."

For how often does the church seek not to seize the moment, but freeze the moment? Typically it is some moment of glory in the congregation's life, some fond memory of a person, often a pastor or music director, lay leaders or a practice, or a program.

Another clerical acquaintance told me this story. "When I came to my last congregation as Associate Pastor, I collected some bruises as a result of running headlong into a few booths that had been erected along the way. One I remember especially well. It had to do with a particularly cohesive group of young people who had just graduated from high school, this concluding their involvement in the congregation's youth group. This was a special group. They were blessed and they were a blessing. People recalled their energy, their enthusiasm and their commitment with obvious and appropriate fondness. And then some would go on to say, "There will never be another youth group as good as that one." Whew! Peter couldn't have built a better booth himself!"

We know a moment of glory when we see one, and when we see one, we want to seize one, and when we seize it we want to freeze it.

My colleague went on to describe the effect that particular booth had on the youth who were left behind, struggling to become a group themselves. That booth of "do you remember how wonderful that youth group was" may as well have had the shape of a coffin, because it effectively killed youth ministry in that congregation for a few years, for nobody could do it as well as the previous group. Nobody meant to do that. It's just that our instincts, like those of Peter, make us go for the glory and revel in it and hope it will go on forever, and be disappointed when it passes – as it inevitably must – to make way for God's new thing.

It is a perpetual temptation for the church to become a religious museum, for its leaders to become curators and caretakers, with energies diverted and devoted to the institutionalization of the past, especially moments of glory past. We do much damage when we say that the church was so much better when so and so was pastor, or he led the choir or she led the Sunday School, or the time when everybody went to church, even in the evening, or all was so much better, when the church didn't talk about sex – or name your social issue.

Friends, the past was never that or the future that bad. The future might be scary, but that doesn't make it bad. God has so designed the universe that time marches on. Moments of glory fade. Exciting previews of coming attractions end and the real story we come to see unfolds.

God has done this, I think not only out of divine necessity, but out of divine mercy and compassion as well. Constant ecstatic stimulation, like constant conflict, can and does lead to emotional burnout. As with Jesus, James, Peter, and John on the mountaintop, what goes up must come down. And that's a mercy. A course for thanksgiving and not lament.

All of which brings us back to these six men on the mountain and the voice from the cloud. This particular preview of God's coming attraction is in fact related to the main feature that is about to unfold. God's voice from the cloud confirms it. For when that voice declares, "This is my son, listen to him," Jesus' disciples, then and now, and that's you and me, do well to obey. Listen to him. What is he saying? He just got finished telling about how he must be rejected and suffer and die. That's what we need to listen to. The glory will come. The Transfiguration is a preview. But first must come the main attraction.

The main attraction, a fitting description, for when Jesus spoke of his crucifixion, he said, "When I am lifted up, I will draw all people to myself." That's the main attraction, the cross of Christ, hard though it is to understand, hard though it is for our Lord to bear.

My brothers and sisters in Christ. In three short days, it is Ash Wednesday, the day which marks the beginning of Lent. I pray that we all might be obedient to the divine command, "Listen to him." May each in our own way focus on the cross and attend carefully to the story that unfolds. The empty tomb of Easter is for now a coming attraction and the Transfiguration is the preview. Jesus has literally to go through hell before that picture opens, and without, the graves of all God's beloved daughters and sons. The good thing is that we know that Jesus does go through it and takes us along with him. For that we say, thanks be to God! AMEN.