

Sermon preached at Faith Presbyterian Church, Springfield, Virginia,
on Sunday, April 16, 1989, by the Rev. W. Graham Smith, D.D.

LUKE 9:30,31

“And behold, two men talked with Him, Moses and
Elijah, who appeared in glory and spoke of His
departure, which He was to accomplish at Jerusalem.”

THREE MEN ON A MOUNTAIN

The Transfiguration of our Lord is a mystery when we come to it; it remains a mystery when we leave it. But it is good for us sometimes to reflect upon experiences which we cannot fully understand. The world is a richer place because there are facts which elude definition, wreaths of mist upon the mountain tops, unfathomable spaces between the stars.

However, we can say with certainty that this thrilling story of the Transfiguration reinforces one of our basic Christian beliefs -- namely, the conviction that Jesus Christ is Lord of all. The disciples, Peter, James and John, who were with Jesus when He was transfigured, were to be the leaders of the faith when Christ's work on earth was ended. They would soon be eyewitnesses of His humiliation and rejection. They would soon see Him scorned by the nation, and put to death as a common criminal; and they would be tempted to believe that they had invested in a lost cause -- that they had given their loyalty and devotion to a deluded fanatic. All around them, even now, were voices saying, “He's a blasphemer. Moses is our teacher -- Moses and the prophets. This man is attempting to supplant Moses. He is undermining and destroying the Law and the prophets.”

But the Transfiguration indicated to the three disciples, as it indicates to us, that Jesus is Lord of all. The Transfiguration is not merely the divine seal on the redeeming ministry of our Lord, it records the fact that God has broken into our world through Him.

What an unforgettable picture, etched upon the minds of the disciples -three men on a mountain: Moses, Elijah and Jesus, talking together about the things they would soon see.

Listen again to our text: “And behold, two men talked with Jesus, Moses and Elijah, who appeared in glory and spoke of His departure, which He was to accomplish at Jerusalem.” The word in the Greek is “exodus” -- “Moses and Elijah...spoke of our Lord's ‘exodus’ which He was to accomplish at Jerusalem.” What a history lies behind that word “exodus”! It spoke of the triumphant deliverance of the children of Israel from the bondage of Egypt. It spoke of enemies in their chariots pressing hard upon the people of God as they made their escape. It spoke of Moses, their divinely-appointed commander, leading them down into that awesome abyss, with the waters of the Red Sea rising on either side of them, but being held back until the chosen of the Lord had all crossed in safety to the other side. It spoke of the enemies of God plunging in, in hot pursuit, and being wiped out to a man, as the waters rushed together to entomb them.

And when Moses and Elijah spoke of our Lord's "exodus," they were thinking and speaking triumphantly; for they, returning for a few brief moments to earth from the glories of heaven, knew that what Moses had done for Israel in leading them to salvation through the Red Sea, and what Elijah had done on Mount Camel in his exposure and defeat of the prophets of Baal, Jesus would accomplish for His people by His death and resurrection.

Moses and Elijah were there to encourage our Lord as He was about to face the darkness and the horror of the Cross. They spoke of His "exodus" which He was to "accomplish." The Cross was a glorious accomplishment and an eternal victory over the powers of death and evil. The Cross was not something that sinful humanity did to Jesus; it was something Jesus did for sinful humanity -- the most splendid spiritual victory of all time!

So, there they are on the mountain -- those three men - Moses the lawgiver; Elijah the prophet; and Jesus the Savior; and the divine Voice from beyond the veil exclaiming --

"This is My Beloved Son; listen to Him!"

What is the practical meaning of all this for us? Well, there were three men on the mountain, and each one of them has a message for us.

1. Moses was there because he stands for LAW -- the eternal, perfect, unchangeable Law of God. We can never escape from that. It was here long before Moses received the tables of the Law on Mount Sinai.

Once when Thomas Edison was working on an experiment, a thunderstorm blew up, and the electrical disturbance in the lightning flashes interfered with his instruments. He turned to his assistant and said, "Sammy, there's an engineer around." Everywhere in the physical world people have been learning that. They have looked through the telescope into the starry heavens, and wherever they look, there is LAW — not chance, but Law so exact that you can predict, to a split second, an eclipse of the sun that will occur one thousand years from now. "There's an engineer around." Indeed, there is. The science student has looked through a microscope down into the infinitesimal world of atoms and electrons, and there, in that amazing world is the same thing -- LAW: nothing hit or miss, nothing true today and false tomorrow -eternal, universal, unchangeable Law.

We can't break these laws, really; we can only be broken by them. A man who jumps from the top of the Empire State Building doesn't break the Law of Gravitation, but it certainly breaks him. This is why we have learned to respect these laws of nature. At least one little fellow did. He wrote to his favorite magician on TV, and this is what he said: "I might get a chemistry set for my birthday, so please write and tell me what not to mix together so I won't blow up our house."

And yet the amazingly sad fact about our modern world is that while we have developed an ever-deepening respect for Law in the physical world, we have, at the same time, forgotten or neglected or defied the Law of God in the realm of morality. To our dire peril we have slighted what the Word of God teaches from Genesis to Revelation, namely: "Whatsoever a man soweth,

that shall he also reap.”

When Moses came down from Mount Sinai, all he had were a few plainly written laws: reverence God; respect your parents; tell the truth; be pure in body, mind and spirit; respect the other fellow, his property, his personality, his reputation; just ten basic laws. And we can't break those laws. When we oppose or ignore them, they break us.

Three men on a mountain, and the first is Moses. Is there anything more urgently needed in our world today than an old-fashioned revival of morality -- a deep sincere respect for the simple, basic laws of life? We have advanced scientifically to the point where we can easily put a man upon the moon, and at the same time we have the morals of the caveman. Give a child a loaded gun and you know what is liable to happen. We have that awesome weapon of power, nuclear energy, at our disposal. It remains to be seen whether we have the corresponding moral power to control it and use it aright.

“Thou shalt have no other gods before Me.” Put God first in your life -- your home life, your business life, your social life. Do your part to put God first in the life of the nation and of the world.

“Remember the Sabbath Day to keep it holy.” Is there any commandment that is so universally infringed today as this one, even by professing Christian people?

“Thou shalt not kill.” Set that over against the lawlessness which in these United States provides one murder every forty minutes, and a major crime every twenty seconds; and 30,000 people butchered on the highways each year by intoxicated drivers.

“Thou shalt not commit adultery.” Be faithful in the marriage relationship; be pure in thought, word and deed.

“Thou shalt not steal.” There is a crookedness in life today from top to bottom. Too often in business the rule is not “Is it right?” but “Will it pay?”

“Thou shalt not bear false witness.” Think of this commandment in relation to the smear tactics employed by political opponents, or the gentle deadly gossip that can rob a good person of his reputation.

The Law of God in individual life and in the life of the world.

2. Elijah was there because he was a PROPHET -- and the prophets of Israel always stood primarily for this: The Will of God in social and national life. A lot of us have strange notions about the Old Testament prophets. We think of them as long-haired hermits, weird fellows who lived quite apart from life -- fortune tellers predicting the future, the ancient equivalent of our modern crystal gazers, palmists and teacup readers. But nothing could be further from the truth. The prophets were, for the most part, public men, statesmen, men of insight. Their job was not so much to foretell as to forthtell. And as for living apart from life, that is exactly what they did not do. No! The prophets were spokesmen for God in public life, insisting that the Law and Will of

God be applied to all the practical affairs of national life. That is why they killed many of the prophets. You don't kill harmless old hermits!

It comes as a bit of a shock to some people even today — this idea that religious faith has anything to do with public life -- politics and economics, and so on. They think of religion as a very personal, private matter -- weddings, funerals, helping people in trouble, getting people converted, developing the interior life of the spirit. That's what Hitler wanted when he called together the religious leaders of Germany and said to them, Gentlemen, you attend to your business of saving souls; but remember, I'm running the German nation." That is a common attitude today. "Leave the Church to do the praying and the preaching, but let religion keep clear of big business, and labor disputes, or the political situation."

People who think religion should stay in Church had better give the prophets a wide berth. They were public men, stubborn fellows who believed the Law of God must be applied to business, politics, and all the practical affairs of the nation. They were good illustrations of what William Ewart Gladstone meant when he said, "The business of statesmen is to find out where God Almighty is going and go along with Him."

Three men on a mountain -- Moses, Elijah. You remember Elijah -- he was no timid soul; he didn't say his prayers in a room with the shutters closed up. He was no cloistered monk intent only on the development of his own spiritual life. Ask Jezebel about him -- Jezebel, King Ahab's wife, who bossed her husband and kicked him around like the family cat. She wore the pants, and everybody was scared stiff of her except Elijah the prophet of the Lord, who was prepared to sacrifice everything, including his own life, in order that the Will of God might be carried out in the national life. He certainly put a hole in Jezebel's drum, and he won a resounding victory over the false prophets of Baal in that historic and dramatic confrontation on Mount Cannel.

A Christian statesman said recently, "If Christian people want Christian ideals in their government, they must be more willing than they have been to pay the price of it. They must stop standing on the sidelines condemning the mess and take some risks in getting into it. They must be more diligent in getting Christian people elected to public office. Someone must stand for God's way where the battle is being fought. And when they withdraw into their churches, they leave the field wide open for other forces to move in and take over."

The Law of God in individual life.

The Will of God in national life.

3. Jesus was there because He was the Savior.

The Law of God in Moses; the Will of God in the prophets; and the Love and Grace of God in Christ.

Christ's primary concern and emphasis was always not on law, or political action primarily, but on the spiritual transformation of the individual. Until the individual is changed, until he enters into a saving relationship with God in Christ, there can be no hope for the nation or for the world. You can't build a good house with bad bricks, and you certainly cannot build it

on a sandy foundation. The government of a nation or a church can never be any higher than the character of the individuals who compose the nation or the church. Jesus always went straight to the heart of the problem which is the problem of the heart.

A little boy was having great difficulty with his new jigsaw puzzle. It was a map of the world, and he found it almost impossible to make any headway. However, he made the encouraging discovery that the other side of the puzzle was the picture of a man's face. Soon he had put the man together, and then, turning the whole thing over, he found to his delight that he had the map of the world complete. And in his innocent enthusiasm, he exclaimed to his father, "Dad, when I got the man right, I got the world right!"

Getting the man right! I know that is not the whole answer, but without it everything else is futile. That is why Jesus said even to Nicodemus, a leading layman in the Jewish faith, "Nicodemus, you must be born again!" That is to say, "If you are ever to enter into God's Kingdom, there must take place in your life a transformation as radical as physical birth."

And that is why Jesus died upon the Cross -- so that men and women, one by one, might be brought to face God, to realize and acknowledge their personal sinfulness, and to embrace that boundless love and mercy of the all -- holy God Who there at Calvary offered full atonement for sin, so that every human life might be changed, transformed, made new by the power of that eternal sacrifice! In this lies the only hope of the world.

An old Chinese proverb says:

"If there is righteousness in the heart,
there will be beauty in character;
If there is beauty in character,
there will be harmony in the home;
If there is harmony in the home,
there will be order in the nation; and
Where there is order in the nation,
there will be peace in the world."

"Righteousness in the heart... Peace in the world."

AMEN.