**Sermon Transfiguration C**

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**Text:** *“Then Moses went up from the plains of Moab to Mount Nebo, to the top of Pisgah, and the Lord showed him all the land, Gilead as far as Dan…” (Deuteronomy 34:1-12)*

Our Old Testament text renders this eulogy to Moses, the prophet: “Moses was 120 years old when he died. His eye was undimmed, and his vigor unabated … And there has not arisen a prophet since in Israel like Moses, whom the Lord knew face to face, for all the signs and wonders that the Lord sent him to do in the land of Egypt, to Pharaoh and to all his servants and to all his land, and for all the mighty power and all the great deeds of terror that Moses did in the sight of all Israel.” (Deut 34:7, 10-12) However, for all this Moses was not immortal. He was far from perfect. God had forbidden Moses from entering the land of Canaan promised to his fathers Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. “I have let you see it with your eyes,” He says, “but you shall not go over there.” (v. 4)

It was his own damned fault that Moses was not allowed to enter the promised land. During the Israelites’ forty-year meanderings in the wilderness, at a place that would be known as the Waters of Meribah (“quarreling”), Moses had disobeyed the Lord’s instructions. The people needed water. God would supply a miracle: water from a rock. But the prophet added his own spectacle to God’s word. The incident is recorded in Numbers chapter twenty: “and the Lord spoke to Moses, saying, ‘Take the staff, and assemble the congregation, you and Aaron your brother, and tell the rock before their eyes to yield its water. So you shall bring water out of the rock for them and give drink to the congregation and their cattle.’ And Moses took the staff from before the Lord, as he commanded him. Then Moses and Aaron gathered the assembly together before the rock, and he said to them, ‘Hear now, you rebels: shall we bring water for you out of this rock?’

“And Moses lifted up his hand and struck the rock with his staff twice, and water came out abundantly, and the congregation drank, and their livestock. And the Lord said to Moses and Aaron, ‘Because you did not believe in me, to uphold me as holy in the eyes of the people of Israel, therefore you shall not bring this assembly into the land that I have given them.” (Num 20:7-12) Moses had failed to hallow God’s name and word; and even he, the greatest prophet before Christ, had to be made an example of by way of God’s just anger. The soul that sins shall die (Ezek 18:20). The promised land, a land flowing with milk and honey (Exod 3:8), as we know from hindsight, prefigured the kingdom of heaven which our Lord Christ Jesus opened to all believers. Being thus barred from entering the land of Canaan, Moses’ death on Mount Nebo and his unmarked grave served as a warning to those who, by false teaching or hypocritical living, profane God’s name.

“Protect us from this, heavenly Father!” we pray in the First Petition of the Lord’s Prayer: “Hallowed be Thy name.” And with such examples of improper living and heretical teaching abounding in the world all around us – the withholding of affection, slander, and self-importance which make themselves the stock and trade of our interactions with friends, family, and colleagues – we ought all the more to pray fervently that God’s name would be kept holy among us also. How is God’s name kept holy? “God’s name is kept holy when the Word of God is taught in its truth and purity, and we, the children of God, lead holy lives according to it. Help us to do this, dear Father in heaven!” When the great teacher Moses dishonored God by striking the rock – the rock which, St. Paul informs us, was Christ Himself – he struck a blow directly at our Lord.

And yet our Lord does afford Moses this consolation. God, being rich in mercy, shows the dying soul of Moses a glimpse of the whole land of Canaan. From the plains of Moab on the border of Canaan, one could of course see only a narrow stretch of kilmoetres into the land Old Testament Israel was to occupy; but God sent a miraculous vision which enabled Moses, with his undimmed eyes, to behold “all the land, Gilead as far as Dan, and Naphtali, the land of Ephraim and Manasseh, all the land of Judah as far as the western sea, the Negeb, and the Plain, that is, the Valley of Jericho the city of palm trees, as far as Zoar.” (Deut 34:1-3) For as long as he carried around the mortal body subjected by sin Moses would not enter the land of promise. But again, the mercy of God overtakes His justice. Moses is described as a man “whom the Lord knew face to face” (v. 10). How is it possible for a sinful, mortal man – no better than any of us – to see and know God?

Only through Christ and the miracle of His resurrection. The prophet Isaiah reminds us that “he was despised and rejected by men; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief; and as one from whom men hide their faces he was despised, and we esteemed him not. Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows; yet we esteemed him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted. But he was pierced for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his wounds we are healed.” (Is 53:3-6) All of our careless words, our loveless acts, and selfish thoughts – the blows with which we wound and curse our neighbour made in the image of God (Jas 3:9) – they all fall on our Lord Jesus, just as Moses’ spectacular strike opened a wound in the side of the rock that was Christ. But if God in the flesh could forgive Moses, He will certainly forgive our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

In today’s Gospel lesson, our Lord Jesus appeared transfigured before his inner circle of disciples: Peter, James, and John. These men we know were far from perfect; Peter denied knowing Jesus three times before His crucifixion; and each of the brothers James and John, whom Jesus nicknamed the “sons of thunder,” had a violent temper that was equaled only by that of the other. But those sinful, mortal men beheld Jesus in all his divine glory, speaking with Moses and Elijah, “who appeared in glory and spoke of his *exodus*, which he was about to accomplish at Jerusalem.” (Luke 9:31) Now, contrary to the traditional manner in which this event is portrayed, the long-departed Moses and Elijah are nowhere said to be floating in midair. Instead we should see their feet planted on the firm ground of the mountain. Moses did set foot in the promised land; but only after his death, in resurrected glory. A preview of the life and forgiveness we have in Christ.

So it is that Moses, beset with his own weaknesses and faults, is said to have been “faithful in all God’s house as a servant” with Christ being the Son (Heb 3:5-6). Only Jesus Christ gives proper glory to the Father being the Word of God incarnate. He alone, with the Holy Spirit, properly bears the name of God by His essential unity with the Father. We who were baptized into His name most holy must wait for our own entry into heaven before the final revelation as God’s sons by adoption. This is a cross that must be borne, a mystery of faith which we will not comprehend before our own resurrection. But know that we who have been “buried therefore with (Christ) by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life.” (Rom 6:4) Our true home is above, the Mother Church, the heavenly Jerusalem that is free (Gal 4:26). This is the promise. Just as sure as His Word, it cannot fail.

And a final note about God’s Word. As Dr. Stephen Paulson so candidly iterates, is true in what it says: both Law and Gospel. The “soul that sins shall die,” says the Law; and we truly die, first to ourselves, and finally in temporal death. The Gospel says, “I will not die, but I shall live, and recount the deeds of the Lord.” (Ps 118:19) Amen! Your holy name, O Lord, we hallow.