

When a person winds up in this position of standing before a congregation of people, as a pastor or priest, there are many special things that you get to do. We have access to ICU units at 3 am in hospitals. When someone is dying, and you have this vocation, you are invited right in to the pain of a family. It is an amazing thing. One thing I have noticed through the years is that when you have this job, you get to say very special words that other people do not say as much. I have stood beside a grave hundreds of times and read the words of the 23rd Psalm as people stand silently with their tears. We get to say very special words. We actually call them “holy” mainly because they are so special and rare. On Wednesday night I will get to look people in the eyes and say to them “Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return.” On this one night of the year we remind ourselves of our mortality. And that is serious business.

When we clergy stand beside a grave near the end of the funeral service, and read Psalm 23, it is a holy moment. ***Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil...*** Again, holy, sacred words. We are at that point in the year where we are making our way down the trail towards that dark valley. Why? Because the time of LENT is almost here. And Lent is serious, and it is hard. There are two key things emphasized during Lent: 1) our brokenness and human sin, and 2) our mortality, the fact that we will die, and the fact that our knowledge of our mortality probably more than anything else contributes to our sin and brokenness. Lent is coming and it will not be a happy time.

I have grown to love this particular Sunday. Just like some people like to go crazy on Mardi Gras or Fat Tuesday, before the coming of Ash Wednesday, and people whoop it up on Tuesday, so we in the Church don't exactly whoop it up on this last Sunday before Lent, but we do something else on this Sunday. We acknowledge that Lent is coming, during which we will not sing or say Alleluia or Hallelujah, and we will not be overly jubilant. On this Transfiguration Sunday we have already sung some Alleluias. Today we will get a booster shot to help us get through the hard days of the dark valley. And we do that in a really special way, which I will share again right now.

We have already heard our odd story about Jesus and 3 of his friends up on a mountain called "Har Tavor" or Mt. Tabor. What happens on this mountain? Something supernatural happens, as Jesus begins to change into something else, and he stands with figures who would usually never be there. We are told that he glows with this white glow, and he is not the only one. Somehow it is made known that Moses and Elijah have come to this mountain as well. And just like Jesus, they glow with a light that is not normally in our world. Now, people often look at this story and think "Well, this isn't any big deal. It's just an odd story." Well, I find it curious that we are supposed to read this story on this final Sunday before the coming of the dark valley of Lent! Why read this story on this day? Why? Well, I think you'll really like this.

We have to remember that context matters. Our Gospel stories, especially the first three, seem to be written almost like a novel, although Luke seems to be written like a play. We don't just treat them like a phone book or dictionary, where we look up some

things, and then when we've found what we want, we go back to watching a cooking show! Mark's Gospel tells us a story that is carefully laid out. We can see that today's story is from Mark 9. Well, if nothing else, it might be helpful for us to look at Mark ____, right? What happens in Mark 8? Well, in Mark 8 we learn many big things. We learn that Jesus is revealed to be the Messiah, although he is mad about it. He doesn't want people to know. And as soon as they think they know this hot news, Jesus tells them "Well, here is some other news...we are going to Jerusalem, to the Temple, and some corrupt men are going to beat me up and kill me. But then God will bring me back from death." This is not received well by the disciples. Jesus will end up not happy with their attitudes on this, so he will tell them directly the following:

"If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross to follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, for the sake of the Gospel will save it."

Jesus is talking about self-denial, and how we must follow him even at the cost of our own lives too. But the biggest thing here is that Jesus promises his guys that after he is killed, God will resurrect him. They don't really believe it, and they go on through the story not really believing it. So, after Jesus has told them that some rough times are coming, and that he will be killed, Jesus takes his top 3 guys up on the mountain. And what do they see?

What do they see? They see three beings, glowing with a color that is not from this world. We will only see this color one more time in the entire story, at a very special place. Where is the only other place we see this color? In the empty tomb on Easter. It is the color

of the robe of the angel in the tomb. It is not the color of anything in this world. Where does this angel come from? We shouldn't need to ask that. He is from God, as are Moses and Elijah, who are also in their resurrected bodies.

I love this story so much. Jesus has just told them a few days before that he will be killed. But God will resurrect him. And then on this day, he takes them to the mountain, as if to say to his top three guys, ***“Oh, and by the way, this is what it will look like when God resurrects me after my death. And here are Moses and Elijah, and they already look like this. So this will be OK.”***

As we get ready to walk through the valley and confront a lot of things about ourselves and our crazy culture, it will be hard. But it will be okay. Because just like we will hear on Wednesday ***“Remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return,”*** we will also eventually hear Jesus telling us “Because I live, you will live also.”

Can it be that simple for us? As we head for Lent, we need to say “Yes, I will die. But God will resurrect me too. And things are going to be alright.” Can we do that today? Just as we said at the end of the Apostles Creed, I believe in the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting. Let's believe it as we make our way into Lent. Jesus has already shown us how this turns out. AMEN.