

Wake Up. Wash Up. Dress Up.

In the name of him whose glory has been revealed, dear friends in Christ: I wonder if this has ever happened to you: you're sound asleep and having a dream that startles or disturbs you somehow, so much so that it causes you wake up – and though you are now wide awake, because it was all so vivid and upsetting you don't yet realize you were only dreaming, and so you lie there thinking about how in the world you're going to handle the problems you dreamed about that were so upsetting that they woke you – and this goes on for several minutes maybe until slowly, by degrees, it dawns on you that no, it just doesn't make sense. There are too many inconsistencies, too many things dredged up from the past that no longer apply. It must have been a dream—*and good thing it was too*. How many of you have experienced something like that?

I mention it because it's a little like what happens to Peter, James, and John in this morning's Gospel reading which concerns the Transfiguration of Jesus. So, let me set this up: St. Luke begins by telling us that this remarkable manifestation of Jesus' glory on the mountain takes place *about eight days later* – which sort of begs the question, "Eight days later than what?" It's an important question because knowing the answer will help us understand what's going on in today's text.

This episode takes place at what could be considered the highpoint of the first phase of the ministry of Jesus. He's been preaching and teaching all over the country; and, of course, performing all kinds of healing miracles for people. Multitudes are coming to him – he's at the pinnacle of his popularity. And now he's just performed the miracle of the feeding of the five thousand – and throughout the country people are going wild with anticipation. They're wondering what it all means – but the overall sensation is that we are experiencing the dawning of a new age. It's in this context that Jesus puts this question to his disciples, "Who are people saying that I am?" They answer that people are all over the place in their opinions. "Some say you're John the Baptist come back to life, others say you're Elijah or one of the prophets." "Okay", says Jesus, "What about you guys. *What are you saying about me?*" It's Peter who replies. Speaking for the whole group he says, "You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God." So the disciples believe Jesus to be the long promised Messiah of Israel.

And they're right. Jesus tells them so; but then he goes on to say, "Now that you know *who* I am, let me tell you what I have to do." He then explains to them how he has to go to Jerusalem; there to be rejected, condemned, crucified, and killed – and on the third day to rise again. At this the disciples' mouths hang open. "Huh? What's all this crazy talk about suffering and dying? No, no, Jesus, you don't get it. Sit down; we'll explain it to you: you're the Christ see? You're a king, a king sent to us from God himself. And that means you're a mighty conqueror. You're going to liberate your people from Roman tyranny and establish your own mighty kingdom here on earth. It's going to be fabulous. It's going to make the vaunted glory of Rome look like the tiny glow of a snuffed candle by comparison. There's going to be peace and prosperity for Israel from now on. And we, your closest disciples, are going to be your right-hand men – right there at the top with you." This is their dream. It's the way they see reality. And though Jesus tells them how wrong they are, they simply refuse to let go of their dream.

So, you might say figuratively that, with respect to the much greater realities that Jesus is speaking of, they are sound asleep and lost in their dreamland. The hopes they have in their imaginations have to do with earthly glory. Power, wealth, freedom from worldly oppressors, the end of disease, hunger, and injustice – these are the sorts of things they are expecting of Jesus. And that's how they see the coming messianic age – sort of a fantasy land of palaces and gardens in which they are the masters and their former enemies are their servants. Jesus, on the other hand, is trying to get them to wake up and see the much bigger picture. The enemies he's here to conquer are the devil's hordes not the Roman legions. The threats he's here to defeat are the horrid diseases of sin, the curse of death, and the eternal torments of hell. The hungers he wants to end are in the souls of men. The treasures to which he wants his disciples to aspire are on a different level – and they are not things made of gold, silver, or precious stones; they are

the infinitely more valuable blessings of love, peace, harmony, and the joy of giving oneself completely for the service and benefit of others. And to accomplish these things he must bear a cross. Before he ascends to his true glory, he must take a path downward to suffering and death. And he wants his disciples to wake up and see this.

And so, it is that eight days later we find Jesus on the mountain with his three closest disciples. He's chosen to give them a glimpse of the far greater mission he's on. And it's no coincidence that while he prays about all that is about to unfold, we find the disciples fast asleep. While visions of worldly sugarplums are dancing through their heads they are missing out on the revealed glory of Jesus and the important conversation he is having with his heavenly visitors, Moses and Elijah. These two represent the sum of the Law and the Prophets – together they suggest the whole content of the sacred Scriptures. And so it's interesting that what they're talking about with Jesus is his upcoming "departure" that's about to happen in Jerusalem – which means they are talking about his passion and death. The message here is that's what it's all about. It's what the Scriptures have always been all about; but up until this time people have been spiritually dozing through it.

But now the weary disciples come fully awake. They see Jesus: his garments radiating with intense white light; his exposed face, hands, and feet similarly shining forth with a translucent brilliance that glows from within. They said they believed him to be the Son of God; now they are amazed to see a small fraction of what that means. They see too the heavenly visitors who also appear arrayed in glory. The disciples know instantly who they are, and they manage to catch part of the conversation. At last they are given to understand that there's a whole lot more going on with this Jesus whom they're following than they have been dreaming about.

But this is where they get into that strange threshold world of where dreams mix with reality that I mentioned at the beginning of this message. Though they are now awake and seeing and hearing like they should, in their minds they are still operating under the influence of the dreams they had when they were spiritually asleep. And you know how it is when you wake up someone who's dreaming, and they say something that's just completely off the wall? I mean, it probably makes sense to them because they're in that period of transition between two worlds; but that's exactly what Peter does. He tries to fit the astonishing scene before him into his former way of thinking, and he just blurts out with what first comes to mind. "This is an unexpected development. I see now that there's more going on with Jesus than we thought – but maybe we can capture this moment and make it part of our plans. Let's put up some shelters here so that Jesus and Moses and Elijah can stay here ... and ... and ..." And what exactly Peter was thinking isn't clear. Luke charitably explains, "He just didn't know what he was talking about." But that makes sense because though he was now wide awake, in a spiritual sense he was still half asleep.

Well, anyway, if you really wanted to wake someone up who was acting sluggish and groggy, pouring a bucketful of ice water on them would do the job quite nicely; don't you agree? The spiritual equivalent of that is to make a sinner aware of the fact that he is in the presence of the holy God. A few weeks ago, we looked at what happened to the prophet Isaiah when he was given a vision of the Lord in his temple sitting high and exalted. The prophet was overwhelmed with a sense of terror and impending doom to think that he, a thoroughly unclean person, was standing in the presence of the Lord God Almighty. The same thing now happens to the three disciples. As Peter is still stammering his misguided gibberish, a cloud veiling a yet greater manifestation of God's glory appears and envelops them. Surrounded by this glory they too are overcome with devastating fear to be in God's holy presence – and it's this sense of dread that fills them that really reveals what's wrong with any attempt to bring together the earth-bound religious dreams of fallen humans with the plans and purposes of God.

What I mean is this: people look around at the world's problems and imagine that the causes of them are all "out there". And so they think that the solutions to those problems also lie "out there". So they have a dream. If we could only come up with a way to provide sufficient prosperity for all, if we could only figure out how to cure all the world's diseases, if we could only get rid of the external sources of want and need that plague mankind, well then crime and injustice would end. If we could solve the problems that make people misbehave then there'd be no more violence, intolerance, and hate. Everything would come up roses. And if we could enlist God's help toward meeting these goals, then how could we fail? This was

the messianic dream of the Jews at the time of Christ – and this is the dream of so many people today both inside and outside of the Church. But the answer to the question, “How could we fail?” is easy: we could fail – and we always will fail – because the problems aren’t “out there”. They are in here. The world is filled with hate not because we all need to work on being nicer to each other; but because I am a hateful person – me and everybody else. The world is filled with injustice not because of a lack of resources; but because I am a selfish person and whenever I get a chance, I’ll bend the rules to my favor. It doesn’t matter if I have enough. I always want more than my share. The source of our problems is not the corruption and diseases out there that afflict mankind; the problem is the uncleanness and sickness within each one of us.

Now, we can hide these truths from ourselves – and we do. We are, in a sense, as oblivious to them as if we were asleep since, after all, the problems out there seem so much bigger than anything we perceive to be wrong about ourselves. But that changes the moment you are aware of the presence of the holy God. Then you are wide awake to the only things that really matter. Then it is just him, you, and your sin. And that is a terrifying truth to wake up to.

But you know, every morning every one of us wakes up. We transition from the sweet comfort of our dream-filled sleep to get on with the business of the day – but before we do we have to some business to attend. First, after having awakened, you need to wash up: you have to wash your face, get that yucky stuff out of your eyes, and comb down those hairs that want to defy the law of gravity and lie in every direction but the one you want. You have to brush your teeth. And then you need to get dressed. You can’t be running around in your pajamas all day.

The same is true in a spiritual sense. And this is the message of the Transfiguration that I want to highlight today. First that we really wake up like the disciples did – not to that confused, half-asleep world of mixed dreams and reality in which we normally live; but to the truth: the important truth that we are at all times sinners in the presence of the holy God.

That frightening fact should lead us naturally to the next step: getting ourselves cleaned up. In the same way that no one here would want to appear in public filthy and foul smelling, we should at all times dread even more appearing before God soiled with sin. We need to get washed. But this is something we cannot do ourselves: sin doesn’t wash off like dirt does with soap and water; but the voice that came from heaven to the disciples saying, “This is my beloved Son” also directs us to “Listen to him”. That’s how our washing is accomplished: it happens when Jesus speaks to us his words of forgiveness – forgiveness made possible by his surrendering of himself, his body and blood, on the cross for our sins.

And that also accomplishes for us the third step: getting dressed up. When we hear the Lord Jesus speak to us and listen to him proclaim that our sins are forgiven for his sake, we are at the same time clothed with his own perfect life and righteousness. And today with the disciples on the mountain we get a glimpse of what that really looks like: a dazzling white splendor that glows from within. Moses and Elijah appear in this glory with their Lord – and so does everyone else who is doing what they are doing: namely, talking about and trusting in the “departure” of Jesus that for them was yet to be accomplished; but that we know took place in Jerusalem almost two thousand years ago.

So, wake up. Wash up. Dress up. That’s the lesson of the Transfiguration – and in a broader sense, it’s what the Christian life is all about. As we continue to grow in faith and life we do so by waking up more and more each day to the truths that Christ reveals to us through his Word. This is what causes us to let go of silly earthly dreams that confuse us, cloud our thinking, and cause us to say things that just don’t make any sense. Then in light of the new truths freshly revealed, we see how it’s even more important that we come to Christ continually to have our sins washed away and to be clothed in the glory of his perfection. That’s how moving toward maturity in the faith is accomplished, and that’s what gives us the ability to stand blameless and fearless in God’s holy presence now in time and forever in eternity.

Okay, everyone got it? This sermon is done now. It’s time wake up. In Jesus’ name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!

