

“It Is Good to Be Here”

In the name of him in whom is revealed the fullness of God’s glory, dear friends in Christ: There are some places in the world that are simply worth seeing in person. There’s no substitution for being there and experiencing them first hand. Take the Grand Canyon, for example. Yes, you can look at pictures and get some sense of it; but unless you’ve actually stood at the rim and peered down, or walked out to one of the many prominent points where the canyon practically surrounds you on all sides, or taken a hike or burro ride down seemingly endless switchbacks, there’s just no way you can fully appreciate the immensity and majesty of it all. There are lots of other places I can think of that are the same way, like Bryce Canyon, the Grand Tetons, Zion, Yosemite, and Niagara Falls to name a few.

We call such places “natural wonders”. And if you are a person of faith, when you visit one you can’t help thinking that the Lord of Creation must have put it there to show off a bit – and I don’t mean that in a negative way. It’s entirely fitting that he whose glory fills the skies should also leave spectacular displays of his fingerprints here and there on earth. Such places are powerful and moving. They are well worth going to. And when you do visit such a place with your family you’re likely to think, “I’m glad we came. It’s good that we are here.”

There’s another kind of place worth mentioning where it’s good to be. These are places made special not so much by what is *seen* there; but rather by what *happens* there. A family home is a good example. Even the most humble dwelling, if it is filled with happy memories, and if there love and life with all its joys and sorrows are shared, it becomes something grand. It becomes a place of comfort and safety, a refuge from the cares and concerns of the world, a place of nurturing and mutual support and encouragement. It might be nothing to look at, but it’s true: there’s no place like home. And when you’re in a place like that with your loved ones you can feel it: It’s good to be here.

Now, if you can imagine combining these two kinds of places: where you’ve got something awesome to behold on one hand and then you couple that with something fundamentally significant to human life and wellbeing on the other – why, then you’d have a place that’s really tremendous. Then you’d have a place very much like what we’ve got in a two of today’s Scripture readings. The main difference is that instead of the awesome sight being a *natural* wonder that the Lord placed there to adorn his creation, the glorious sight to behold is a *supernatural* appearance of the Lord himself.

The first location is Mt. Sinai. It’s some fifty days after the Children of Israel were delivered from their slavery in Egypt by passing through the Red Sea. That too must have been something to see: imagine passing through a grand canyon with walls of water rather stone. But now, following the Lord’s instructions, Moses has led the people here to the mount where God first appeared to him in a burning bush. Now the Lord intends to show himself to all his people. So for three days the Israelites have been consecrating themselves preparing to meet the Lord. They’ve been washing and rewashing everything external, and doing all the corresponding spiritual exercises to prepare their hearts within. Then the big day comes. They all gather around the foot of the mountain wearing their Sabbath day best. Little hands and faces appear a bright cherubic red because they’ve been scrubbed so clean by vigilant mothers. They all stand waiting in reverent silence. No one is allowed to come too close. There are

markers set out so that no one trespasses onto the mountain itself. To do so, they've been told, would mean instant death.

And then, attended by the deafening sound of trumpet blasts, the glory of God descends on the mountain. He takes the form of a consuming fire. And soon the whole mountain is obscured with billowing clouds of smoke from which are seen intermittent flashes of fire and lightening. The earth beneath the people's feet shakes as the mountain sends forth shock waves as if it's trembling at the touch of the footsteps of God.

Now Israel and the God who redeemed them are face to face. And the people are completely overwhelmed with a sense of abject terror. The only reason they don't run away is because they're frozen in fear. Suddenly all their work of preparation seems woefully inadequate. I mean, how do sinners prepare themselves to meet the holy and righteous God? How can anyone who is by nature evil stand in his presence? It's simply not possible. And then, only making matters worse for them, the Lord begins to speak. His thunderous voice is like the roar of a thousand Niagara Falls. And what he speaks are the Ten Commandments: "I am the Lord who brought you out of Egypt. You shall have no other gods. You shall not take my name in vain. You shall keep my Sabbath. You shall honor your parents. You shall not murder ..." On it goes and each one is like a hammer blow crushing their hearts of stone. They reel from the impact of each word. The commandments expose every sinful thought, word, and action of their pasts. All is laid bare before the Lord. And when there's a momentary pause after the last command, the people cry out in anguish, "Moses! Beg the Lord to stop speaking. If we hear him anymore we will all surely die!" At this the Lord relents. He says to Moses, "What they say is good. You be the mediator. You come up to me alone, and I will give you my covenant to teach them.

It's actually here that this morning's Old Testament lesson begins – after Moses has returned from his first trip up the mountain. Now he has the Lord's covenant. It's a covenant of sacrifice and blood. It's true that no sinner can stand in the presence of the Lord and live; but the Lord in his mercy has provided a way for sinners to be cleansed. It involves substitutionary sacrifice. The Lord will allow the sins of the people to be placed upon certain animals that will die in their place – that is, they will die the death the people deserve on account of their sin. And when the people are covered by the shed life-blood of these animals, the Lord will reckon their sin debt paid.

So that's what we see: Moses armed with a hyssop branch, dipping it into bowlfuls of blood and spattering it over people. *Now* they are prepared. *Now* they can stand before the holy God without fear—so much so that Moses and the leaders of the people can come forward and meet the Lord in a much closer setting. They sit and dine in his presence – it's like a family meal with God at the head of the table. He is their host at a banquet that's convened at this marvelous meeting place where heaven and earth come together. And interestingly enough, they are drinking wine and eating the roasted meat of the animals that died so that they could sit here in God's glorious presence without fear. *That* would have been a good place to be, would it not?

Okay, now let's jump ahead some fifteen centuries and join Jesus and his three closest disciples on an early morning mountain hike. A week before, Peter had made his bold confession. Jesus asked, "Who do you say that I am?" And Peter, speaking for the group, had replied, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." Jesus told Peter that he was blessed. He hadn't reached this conclusion through observation or logical deduction; rather this truth had

been revealed to him by the Father through the illumination of the Holy Spirit. Or, say it another way, he saw this truth by faith and inspiration; not by human sight and power of reason.

But now Jesus has chosen these three witnesses to see with their eyes the truth that they have with their mouths confessed. Upon reaching the top of the mountain, the weary disciples find a comfortable place to nap in the sun while Jesus steps aside to pray. Their nap doesn't last long. All at once they come fully alert and gaze in wonder at their Lord whose appearance has changed remarkably. He shines with a divine brilliance more intense than the sun. It's like he has pulled back a curtain that has prevented them from seeing the glory that was there in him all along.

With Jesus they see two Old Testament saints: Moses and Elijah. They too shine with glorious light, and they are overheard speaking with Jesus. St. Luke, in his Gospel, informs us that they were speaking specifically about Jesus' upcoming death and resurrection – which only makes sense. These two stand as representatives of all the law and prophets, the sum total of sacred Scripture – all of which is about God's plan of salvation by sending his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for the sins of the world. That central story is always there—though it's usually concealed just below the surface in any number of foreshadows, figures, and types. And so what we've got going on here is sort of a double revelation to the disciples. Both the fullness of the divine nature of Jesus and the fact that he is the sum and substance of the Scriptures is being shown to them. Then you've got to add the fact that this same Jesus is more than their teacher, he is also their close friend and constant companion. They are surely aware of the tremendous privilege he has given them in choosing them to be the ones with whom to share this singular vision. Again it's Peter who speaks for the others. He's stunned at whole thing, and some of what he says really doesn't make much sense; but he does get it absolutely right when he says, "Lord, it is good that we are here."

It's as he's getting to those other parts that don't make sense that the bright cloud envelops them. They are filled with the same holy dread that overcame their ancestors when God's glory appeared on Mount Sinai. And once again the voice of the Lord comes thundering—this time not with a long list of commandments for them to obey; but instead with the solution to their sin problem. Here's the answer. Here's your mediator. Here's the perfect sacrifice that takes away the sin of the world. "This is my beloved Son with whom I am well pleased; *listen to him.*"

The three disciples lay on their faces trembling until Jesus comes over and touches them. The bright cloud is gone now. Moses and Elijah are no longer seen. It's just Jesus. Only Jesus. And he appears as he always did before: a rather plain looking Jewish man in a woolen tunic. He's smudged with dirt and sweat just like them – nothing about his appearance would tip anyone off as to his true identity. But these three have seen the truth. And at his touch their fear evaporates. And as they head down the mountain in his company, I'm pretty sure that it crossed all of their minds that wherever he is, there is a good place to be.

And so they continued to follow him throughout the countryside of Galilee and Judea. They followed him right up until he went to the place that they couldn't go – indeed that they refused to go. Oh, they promised that they would stick with him; but in the end they all abandoned him and fled in fear. There was nothing good about that place. The horrifying sight to see was God's Son crucified as a criminal. And what was happening there was that he was taking upon himself the wrath of God against the sins of the world. If at Sinai and the Mount of Transfiguration heaven and earth met briefly, there at Calvary hell in all its fury made its earthly appearance. That would definitely not have been a good place to be.

But we can be grateful that our Lord Jesus went there for us, and that after he went there and finished the mission he came to accomplish, giving himself over to death for our sakes, he returned to his disciples. He came to them and allowed them to touch him. He dined with them. He fellowshiped with them. And he continued to teach them and open their minds to understand the Scriptures and what they revealed about him. And then he told them to go forth and share the good news, promising them, "When you gather in my name, when you baptize, when you teach my Word, when you celebrate the Holy Supper, when you care for and love one another, *there I am with you.*" And that, my friends, is always a good place to be.

That's really what this church is all about: to bring us into the presence of Jesus who reveals himself to us in his Word and Sacraments. And no, perhaps his appearance is not that spectacular to see; but it is, nevertheless, a supernatural wonder that we experience. Here the voice of Jesus is heard. Here his forgiveness is proclaimed. Here his Spirit gives us light to understand things that can only be spiritually discerned. Here the blood of the covenant is applied to us in Holy Baptism. And here we dine with him as our host upon the very body and blood that he gave up for us. Wherever and as often as we meet to listen to him it is indeed good that we are here.

May it be for all of us that he who called us to meet with him here in this good place will continue to reveal increasingly more of himself and his grace and forgiveness to us, so that more of his divine light may shine forth in our words and actions. God grant it to us for Jesus' sake. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!