Sermon for March 12

[**Genesis 12:1-4a**](http://lectionary.library.vanderbilt.edu/texts.php?id=25#hebrew_reading)

[**Psalm 121**](http://lectionary.library.vanderbilt.edu/texts.php?id=25#psalm_reading)

[**Romans 4:1-5, 13-17**](http://lectionary.library.vanderbilt.edu/texts.php?id=25#epistle_reading)

[**John 3:1-17**](http://lectionary.library.vanderbilt.edu/texts.php?id=25#gospel_reading)**or**[**Matthew 17:1-9**](http://lectionary.library.vanderbilt.edu/texts.php?id=25#gospel_oth_reading)

One of the great stumbling blocks in accepting Christianity intellectually can be summed up by the simple question: "Why is it taking so long?"

To elaborate on that a little bit, the problem might go something like this. Standard Christianity teaches that at a certain point in time, Christ will return from where He now is in Heaven, and draw the present age to a close. The details of that end stage vary among different schools of Christian thought. Some say the process will be sudden and complete, others that it will itself have several well-defined stages - a rapture, a thousand year interim, a final resurrection, for example. And even within these two alternatives, there are many alternative scenarios that people have offered, and continue to debate even to this day.

But for any and all of these alternatives that people have worked out, often in intricate detail, the same puzzling question can be raised. Why hasn't it happened yet? Whether it's a single stupendous instantaneous happening or some more drawn-out series of happenings, why hasn't it happened yet? What's taking it so long?

This is made particularly troubling for many people, because the earliest Christians were apparently convinced that it would happen soon, even within their own lifetimes. Paul, for example, who first articulated the essential doctrines of Christianity to which we subscribe today, reveals in several places in his letters that this was his own belief, and he shared that belief with the churches he established. And there are many similar indications in other early Christian writers.

And yet, here we are, two thousand years later, still waiting.

Not for those of secure faith, this need not be a very troubling question. They can quote Christ Himself, who said, speaking of His return, "Watch therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour." (Matthew 25: 13)

Surely, those of faith will say, what's important is to live every day as if it were the day of Christ's return.

Now that is a profoundly faithful and, I believe, profoundly fruitful way to try to lead one's life as a Christian.

But for those who are looking at Christianity from the outside, wondering whether this is the faith for them, or for those whose Christian faith is young or not very deep, and particularly for those who regard their own lives as governed by their intellects, this is, as I said at the beginning, a major stumbling block. If God became incarnate to initiate the process of bringing heaven to earth, and if God can do anything, why is it taking so long? Just so more people can be born? But that leads to absurdities as soon as you press it a little.

So what I'd like to do this morning is give an answer to that question, and it's an answer that arises out of reflection on the passage we find in our Gospel reading for this today.

But before we read it, let me tell you what I believe the answer to the question is, the answer to why the spread of the Kingdom of God seems to be proceeding at such a snail's pace, with so much hesitation, with failures and setbacks seemingly as common as successes. And most of all, to why, after two thousand years, we are still waiting for Christ to appear in all His glory.

My answer is because God has limited Himself to using a single tool - just one and no other - in accomplishing His goal of the salvation and perfection of humanity. A single tool, as if the sculptor who created Mount Rushmore had decided to do so using only a single chisel, and nothing else.

What is that tool? It is the resurrection life of Jesus Christ.

If we turn now to our Gospel passage for this morning, we'll begin to see, I believe, how Jesus communicated that intention of His father to his followers, and through them, to us. So let's read it together.

Matthew 17: 1-9

Now this passage gives us an account of one of the best known incidents in Christ's earthly ministry. Like several others - for example, the Annunciation, the Feeding of the Multitude, the Crucifixion, to name a few - this incident is so pivotal to that ministry that it has been given a name by which it's commonly designated: the Transfiguration.

It's called the Transfiguration for the obvious reason that in in, Jesus appears to three of His students in a strikingly different way from that in which they were accustomed to seeing Him. His face shone like the sun, we are told, and his clothing became impossibly white.

The various elements of this incident ate familiar to us, and each of those elements is rich with meaning. Jesus leads the three students up a mountain, separating them from the crowd and even their fellow students, a gesture that surely suggests that solitude and silence are and being alone with God are important elements in Spiritual progress.

On the mountain, the disciples see the glorified Jesus conversing with two others whom they recognize as Moses and Elijah, the great Lawgiver and the great Prophet, and clearly Jesus is showing His disciples that He himself is the great Lawgiver and the great Prophet of the age to come, the new age, the one we call eternal.

These and other elements of the incident are full of meaning. But I want to focus this morning on what happens in the two incidents that conclude our reading. The first is usually dismissed as simply impetuous, even goofy old Peter being Peter, letting his mouth do his thinking, as usual. And the second is usually relegated to one of those 'mysterious' things Christ said for reasons nobody really can make much of.

But I think the two incidents, when read together, make all the sense in the world, and in fact point to what is perhaps the deepest truth we can learn, as christians, this side of eternity.

The first is when Peter offers to build three tents there on the mountain, one for Jesus and one each for Moses and Elijah. That offer of Peter's is usually interpreted as a product of his being mentally overwhelmed by the enormity of the moment. But if we understand the significance the offer to built tents had to the Jewish mind, what Peter was asking makes perfect sense. The word translated as 'tents' is also the word of 'tabernacles,' and for the Jews, the erecting of tents or tabernacles was an event that would mark and celebrate the long hoped-for advent of the Messiah, and the introduction of the Golden Age to come. So what Peter was in effect asking, having just witnessed the transfiguration of His master, and the conversation between Jesus and the greatest figures of the Jewish history...what Peter was asking was simply, Is this it? Is it now happening, Master? Is this a sign that the great unveiling of your Rulership is upon us? Shall we begin the celebration right here, right now?

But what happens then, in response to that suggestion. God Himself speaks from a cloud, repeating the words we first heard when Jesus was baptized by John and the Holy Spirit descended and rested on Jesus and God annointed him for his work: "This is my son, my beloved son." And God this time adds: "Listen to him." Listen to him. Listen to what he has to say to you. Now is not the time for tents, now is the time to listen to him. And Jesus immediately steps back in into the scene, once again completely normal. No, now is not the time yet for tents. This is the time for listening to him.

And what is the first thing Christ has to say after this. They are coming down the mountain, and Our Lord tells His students: Don't say anything about what just happened, until the Son of Man has been raised from the dead.

And there you have it. The deep meaning of the Transfiguration, I believe, is that Christ is teaching that the accomplishment of his mission must await His death and resurrection, and that it will be accomplished by his followers through the communication of His word, both the word about him, and the word he himself taught. In other words, through the gospel message.

We find the same message, enlarged and elaborated upon, in the seventh chapter of the gospel of John, in the great scene of Jesus crying out to the crowd while teaching in the Temple. We are told it happened on the last and most important day of the festival. What festival was it? It was the fall festival called Tabernacles, when tents are erected all around the city to commemorate the time the Jewish nation spent wandering in the wilderness, but more importantly, in celebratory anticipation of the coming of the Messiah, and the final deliverance He would bring.

Here's the passage:

'On the last and greatest day of the festival, Jesus stood and said in a loud voice, “Let anyone who is thirsty come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as Scripture has said, rivers of living water will flow from within them.” By this he meant the Spirit, whom those who believed in him were later to receive. Up to that time the Spirit had not been given, since Jesus had not yet been glorified.' (37-39)

What are the springs of living water? They are the message and the power of the Holy Spirit working through the lives of those who have willingly given themselves over to be vehicles of God's grace to the world. But notice what Christ says. Listen to Him as John did. John says: "..the spirit had not been given, since Christ had not been glorified."

Christ said to his disciples, coming down from the mountain: Wait until after the resurrection, until after I have been glorified.

It is the **glorified**spirit of Christ that we receive when we accept Him as our Lord. Not the holy spirit we read about in the old testament. It is that spirit, united with humanity, glorified through the crucifixion and death of a human being, and brought back to life and reunited with God the Father in its new and greater glory, that we receive when we accept Him as our Lord. And it is to honor that Spirit, that God has entrusted to it, and it alone, the responsibility for redeeming the lives of all his children.

High-falutin' language, wouldn't you say? What does it all mean when we get back down to earth?

What I think it means is that God has more faith is us Christians than we have in ourselves. The salvation of all humanity, at all times and everywhere, is assured. That has been accomplished by Christ the Son. But the means whereby that happens, and will always happen, is through the work of Christ's resurrected spirit - the Holy Spirit of God that entered into a human life, perfected and sanctified it, died and was resurrected with it - Christ's own resurrected spirit, operating through individual Christians, with all their weaknesses. People like you and me.

That's why it's a very slow process.

And so, Father, our prayer for today, is that you bring each and every one of us into a greater awareness of our responsibility. We acknowledge the great gift of having received the spirit of the resurrected Christ , and we ask that you make us alive to the possibilities that gift opens up to us: the possibility of living a life of humility, in following Christ, of prayer, in following Christ, and of optimism, in following Christ, in whose name we pray.