

## ***A Picture of Promise***

Luke 9:28-36

Transfiguration Sunday; Series C



The Dutch painter, Hieronymus Bosch, painted in the 1500's and is well known for his use of imagery to illustrate moral and religious concepts. Many of his paintings could be described as "busy." They are elaborate, detailed scenes, as if he is standing at the top of a building in the middle of a city, painting everything he sees. One such painting is entitled, *The Garden of Earthly Delights*. Bosch paints three scenes on three different panels and hinges them together to form what is called a "triptych." When the panels are closed in on each other, a painting of the earth during creation is displayed on the front cover. When the panels are opened up, the viewer beholds a wonderful and terrible sight all at the same time.

On three panels Bosch attempts to visually illustrate the Biblical accounts of creation, temptation and the Fall, and Hell. The left panel depicts God presenting Eve to Adam. The central panel is a broad display of figures and animals. The right panel depicts Hell and the pain of eternal separation from God. Bosch's painting begins with a picture of a wonder—the gift of creation. When the gift is opened up, the viewer then sees the terror—creatures misusing and abusing the gift of creation and suffering the consequences of it.

In our Old Testament reading this morning, God took Moses to the top of a mountain and showed him a picture. He showed him the picture of the Land of Israel that he had promised to give to the offspring of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. It is a picture of promise. Finally, our God who always keeps his promises is allowing his people to live in the Promised Land.

God had used Moses to deliver his people from slavery in Egypt. Through Moses God accomplished the Exodus. God brought his people out of a life of slavery and oppression. God delivered his people from Pharaoh and the Egyptians who had set themselves up to be the very enemy of God. They had separated the people from their God and prohibited the people from worshipping him. And so God wins his people back. Through the shedding of the blood of the Passover Lambs and by walking through the water of the Red Sea, God rescued his people from the slavery and oppression that were keeping them from him.

God accomplished the Exodus for his people. The word "Exodus" is a Greek word meaning the "way out." The sacrifice of lambs and water is the way that God provided to bring his people out of slavery and into the Promised Land. Through sacrifice and water God redeemed his people. Now, after the people have wandered in the wilderness for forty years, God is finally bringing them into the Promised Land.

For Moses, though, this picture of promise at Mt. Pisgah is one of both wonder and terror all at the same time. In the Old Testament reading we read of God bringing Moses up to the top of a mountain so that he can see all the land that he will give to the people. Moses sees the mountains, the valleys, the plains, all the way to the western sea (vs.2). And

then God lets the other shoe drop, "I have let you see it with your eyes, but you shall not go over there" (vs.4). You can imagine the mixture of wonder and terror, excitement and disappointment, that Moses must have felt. He sees the gift of the land. But because of how he and the people have abused and misused their privileged relationship with God, Moses and many others did not enter into the Promised Land. They were separated from it.

Today is the day of the Transfiguration of our Lord. Transfiguration Sunday serves as a type of bridge in the church year. In many ways it is a bridge that brings together the seasons of Epiphany and Lent. Epiphany ends with the event of the Transfiguration of Jesus. Jesus is arrayed in white and displayed in God's glory between Moses and Elijah, showing that he is greater than both. He shows that he has come to fulfill both the Law and the Prophets as God's Messiah. The event of the Transfiguration of Jesus is an event of great wonder. Even our hymnody testifies to this: "O wondrous type! O vision fair of glory that the church may share, which Christ upon the mountain shows, where brighter than the sun he glows" (*LSB* 413)! If the season of Epiphany is supposed to focus on the gift of the Christ child being displayed for all the nations as the salvation of the world, then there could be no greater culmination to the season of Epiphany than the Transfiguration of Jesus. The scene of the Transfiguration even ends with Jesus standing alone on the mountain, Moses and Elijah having disappeared, and the voice of God the Father booming, "This is my Son, my chosen one, listen to him" (Lk 9:35). What a great picture of awe and wonder.

In the church year, after the event of the Transfiguration, the season of Lent begins. It is, in many ways, a season of terror. Throughout Lent we are forced to open up Bosch's triptych and see how we have misused and abused all of the gifts God has given to us. We are forced to face the reality of the consequence of sin and our own mortality. It is a somber season that focuses on penitence and contrition. What a picture of terror.

The Lenten picture creates a mood of terror and somberness that is purposeful. The goal is to drive us to repent. The goal is that we would be so disgusted and terrified with the picture of sin toward God and the consequence of separation from God, that we would turn from it and turn back to trust in God and his promises.

I recently finished a short memoir written about the author's experience of growing up as a missionary's son in Japan during World War II. The author gives especially the American reader quite a unique perspective. At one point in the memoir, the author reminisces about Mount Fuji. He described Mount Fuji as a picture of terror and wonder all at the same time. He mentioned that many people consider the twelve-thousand-plus foot peak unequalled in majesty and symmetry. He suggests that it commands the admiration of the entire world. What a picture of wonder. Then he described the snow-capped peak. There is a crater, an empty space, at the top of this volcanic mountain. He observed that at the highest point in Japan there is a hole, an empty space. As a missionary's son he suggested that this high emptiness may be a symbol of Japan without Jesus. And not only Japan, but all high cultures of the world in which the vision of Jesus is missing. And so Mount Fuji could also be seen as a picture of terror.

This is why we need our God of promise. Outside of our God whose promises are always "yes in Christ," all we have is a picture of wonder and terror. There is no promise of salvation. There is no true, eternal hope in this world. This is why we need the God who once transfigured himself on a mountain. On the mount of Transfiguration, there was no empty space. There was a picture of wonder and terror, to be sure. But in the midst of that wonder and terror was "Jesus only."

He stands there for all of us who find an empty spot even at the highest points of prestige and accomplishment in our lives. God in Christ steps into the void. The promised Messiah that Moses and Elijah spoke about so long ago in the Old Testament is now present for his people. What a picture of great promise.

On the top of the Mount of Transfiguration Peter asks Jesus if they can stay. It is understandable that Peter would want to stay, having just seen a wondrous vision that revealed Jesus' true identity as the Messiah. But in the verse immediately following our Gospel reading this morning, we read that Peter's request was not granted: "On the next day, when they had come down from the mountain . . ." (Lk 9:37). Peter did not get his way because Jesus still had a place to go. Jesus had to complete the New Exodus once and for all for the entire world through his death and resurrection.

As St. Luke records it in his Gospel, before and after the event of the Transfiguration, Jesus foretells his death and resurrection to his disciples. He tells them how their Messiah is going to defeat the enemy of sin, death, Hell, and the devil that separates the whole world from God, its creator. He tells them the "way out" of slavery to the very enemies of God. Just as God once rescued his people from slavery and oppression to Pharaoh and the Egyptians through the blood of the Passover lambs and the water of the Red Sea, so now God rescues his people once and for all through the blood of the Passover Lamb, Jesus Christ, and the water of holy baptism that unites you and me to this Jesus and his "New Exodus" work.

Our God is a God of promise. He created his people to be united to him not separated from him. He promised long ago that he would once again unite his creation to himself. In Jesus God fulfills that promise. Through Jesus' death and resurrection, God provides the "way out" of this vale of tears. Through the water of baptism and through the body and blood of the Lord's Supper he washes us clean and nourishes us so that we can be brought safely in Christ through the terror and wonder of our world to be united with him in eternity.

I want to return to *The Garden of Earthly Delights* painting for a moment. I think it is significant that Bosch's painting is a triptych. That means that each of the side panels is a separate painting and has to be connected to the center panel with hinges. When the panels are closed the front cover displays the heavens and the earth. Many people go through life with the hinges barely attached. It seems that their whole world may fall apart at any moment. And they are terrified at what others may see inside when that happens. To these people and for the whole world we have such good news to give them. We have not only the "way out" but also the "way through" to share with them. We have a wonderful picture of promise to show them. Amen.