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God's Tabernacles Among Men

A Study of the Transfiguration

By WALTER R. ROEHRS

One of the features found in all accounts of the Transfiguration of our Lord is the suggestion of Peter: "Let us build here three tabernacles." We are not told what Jesus' answer to this request was, but from the sequence of events it is clear that it went unheeded.

Peter's request seems to indicate that the disciples had not understood the full import of what they had witnessed, the dawn of God's great Feast of Tabernacles. They did not grasp what it meant when Moses and Elijah spoke to Jesus of the "exodus" that He was to accomplish at Jerusalem. Apparently they merely expressed their desire to linger and to bask in the ease and reflection of this glory. To this extent the request therefore amounted to a temptation for Jesus to stay on the glory-road and not to take the way to Jerusalem and Golgotha. (Later Jesus rejected the temptation by saying to Peter: "Get thee behind me, Satan.")

Whatever was in Peter's mind, this seemingly incidental feature of the Transfiguration nevertheless furnishes a framework into which we can place the whole Transfiguration and see it in a perspective of God's eternal plan of salvation. For the whole story how God was putting into effect in time what He had decreed for our salvation before the foundations of the world were laid can be told in terms of tabernacles, God's tabernacling among men, God's tents of meeting with men. From the vantage point of the Mount of

Transfiguration we can look back into the times when God's glory and mercy tabernacled among His people Israel. On the Mount of Transfiguration we bend the knee before the Word become flesh, to tabernacle in our flesh as John puts it. From this mountain we can raise our eyes even higher to see with John the Seer the tabernacles in the eternal mansions of God.

I IN ISRAEL

How amiable are Thy tabernacles, O Lord of hosts. (Psalm 84:1)

The Psalm verse above speaks to us of God's tabernacling among men in Israel of old. When Peter says on the Mount of Transfiguration: "Lord, it is good to be here," there is an echo in his words of the Psalm verse of our liturgy for this festival: "How amiable are Thy tabernacles, O Lord of hosts."

Can we say this? Mountaintop experiences in the presence of God are not picnic excursions to a pleasant place on a mountainside. Nor are they the result of our efforts to work ourselves up into a sentimental feeling of well-being and amiability, an exhilarating swooning into a cozy world of unreality, a nirvana, a merging with the Deity like the coalescing of a drop of water with the ocean. No, says the psalmist, we are in the presence of the Lord of hosts.

What it means to be in the presence of God, to have mountaintop experiences, is

brought home to us by the presence of Moses and Elijah on the Mount of Transfiguration.

When Moses climbed the holy mountain to receive directions for the building of the tabernacle of God's presence in Israel, "the sight of the glory of the Lord was like devouring fire on the top of the mount in the eyes of the children of Israel" (Ex. 24:17). There was even the stern warning: "Whosoever toucheth the mount shall be surely put to death" (Exodus 19:12). How dramatically this tells us that fallen and rebellious man cannot approach God or stand in His presence. To come into the presence of the Lord of hosts as we are is not an amiable mountaintop experience; it spells death and destruction for the sinner.

Elijah also was there on the Mount of Transfiguration. In his day on earth he too was given a mountaintop experience. On Mount Carmel he witnessed the devouring fire of God descend from heaven. He was the instrument of the justice of God upon those who had defiled themselves. Israel learned that the Lord of hosts demands full accord with the requirements of His holiness. He accepts no divided loyalty, no limping on two sides.

We are not surprised therefore when we are told that the three disciples on the Mount of Transfiguration were afraid, as all sinful men must be in the presence of the Lord of hosts.

And yet the psalmist says: "How amiable are Thy tabernacles, O Lord of hosts." Jesus took Peter, James, and John up a high mountain, and they can say: "It is good to be here." How is this possible?

Again Moses and Elijah are in the picture. God had tabernacled in Israel of old

in a way so that the psalmist could say: "How lovely are Thy dwelling places, O Lord of hosts."

On Mount Sinai the God of the devouring fire also said to Moses and Israel: "I am the Lord thy God which hath brought thee out of the land of Egypt." He was the God of mercy who was putting into execution His eternal plan of making it possible for rebellious men to return to Him, to commune with Him, to have a feeling of amiability in His presence. With a mighty hand and outstretched arm He had delivered the enslaved descendants of the patriarchs through whom He had chosen to bless all the nations of the earth.

In doing so He was not ignoring sin and its clash with His holiness and justice. The fire of His wrath did not go out. He did not retract the verdict that "the soul that sinneth, it shall die." There must be removal of sin, expiation of guilt, satisfaction of justice, atonement for rebellion. Before Israel's tabernacle could be a tent of meeting between God and man, God instructed Moses: "[Aaron] shall sprinkle [the blood] upon the mercy seat and before the mercy seat, and he shall make an atonement for the holy place because of the uncleanness of the children of Israel and because of their transgressions in all their sins" (Lev. 16:15, 16). This procedure and other rites of the Old Testament were stern reminders that without the shedding of blood there is no remission of sin.

But to such a cleansed tabernacle of a cleansed Israel God could and did come. It was an amiable tabernacle because there Israel met the God of salvation, the God merciful and gracious, forgiving trespasses

and sins. Here was God's plan of salvation under way; here was His promise to do what the blood of bulls and goats could not do and merely prefigured until the Lamb of God came to take away the sins of the world.

"How amiable are Thy tabernacles, O Lord of hosts" is true for us only because the Lord of hosts is also our gracious and forgiving God. And the appearance of Elijah reminds us how gracious this God is, how longsuffering He is with our abuse of His goodness. When we lapse into bowing the knee to the baals and idols of our own making, He calls us back to Him. No matter how far we have strayed from Him, He does not bar us from returning to Him. He sends Elijahs to call us back; He lets us climb the Carmel of repentance. He still is ready to call us His own after we have spurned His love and trampled His mercy under foot.

"How amiable are Thy tabernacles, O Lord of hosts." "It is good to be here." Therefore let us build here our own tabernacles, also in our house of worship which we have built. For He is here, yes, the God of Mount Sinai, the God of Mount Carmel, the God who speaks in a voice from heaven on the Mount of Transfiguration. "The Lord is in His holy temple, let all the earth keep silence before Him" (Hab.2: 20). He is here and He lets us come to hear Him saying: "I have removed your transgressions from you as far as the east is from the west. I have cast your sins into the depths of the sea." The stone and wood and iron of this building become transfigured into a tabernacle of God. How dreadful is this place! This is none other than the house of God. Here is our moun-

taintop experience, the high point of beauty, of strength, yes, of exhilaration because it is the place of forgiven sin and the promise of God's amiable presence at our side for every day of our life. How amiable are Thy tabernacles, O Lord of hosts. Lord, it is good to be here.

II

IN THE WORD MADE FLESH

And the Word was made flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, the glory of the Only-Begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth. (John 1:14)

From the Mount of Transfiguration we are trying to get a view of what it means that God tabernacles among men. God dwelt in the tabernacle at the time of Israel to reveal and make known His presence among His people, His glory, His holiness, His mercy and forgiving grace. In the manifestation of a cloud and by means of the temple ritual God assured His people that they could draw near to Him, have access to Him, and commune with Him without fear of the fire of His justice if they confessed their sins and sought His grace and forgiveness. For that reason the psalmist could say, "How amiable are Thy tabernacles, O Lord of hosts."

But even so the glory of God, real as it was, tabernacled in Israel provisionally, by way of anticipation. There was to be a presence of God, a coming of God to His people in fulfillment of all that His manifestation in a tabernacle built with hands promised. It too was the shadow of things to come. Israel was taught to expect it and to look forward to it. Through the prophet Zechariah God pointed to it and said: "I shall come and tabernacle among you" (Zech. 2:14, Hebrew text). Through the

prophet Ezekiel God had promised: "My dwelling place shall be among you, and I shall be your God and you shall be My people." (Ezek. 37:27, Hebrew text)

On the Mount of Transfiguration Peter, James, and John witnessed in an extraordinary way that God had kept His Word. In his gospel John also refers to what he beheld on the Mount of Transfiguration when he says: "The Word was made flesh and dwelt among us (tabernacled among us), and we beheld His glory, the glory of the Only-Begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth."

In the Word made flesh, in this Jesus of Nazareth, made of a woman, God whom the heavens and the heavens of heavens cannot contain had come to be with men; in Him dwelt all the fullness of the God-head bodily, not in a cloud but in Christ Jesus, the God-man.

The disciples beheld His glory in the light of the Transfiguration that shone from Him and blinded them. They heard it in the voice from heaven: "This is My beloved Son." Peter later wrote: "We were with Him in the holy mount." (2 Peter 1:18)

We need not envy the disciples this mountaintop experience. When later Jesus faced His supreme hour, He prayed: "Father, glorify Thy name." A voice from heaven answered: "I have both glorified it and will glorify it again." At that time Jesus remarked: "This voice came not because of Me, but for your sakes." (John 12:27-30). Whatever the Transfiguration meant to Jesus, it came certainly for our sakes. For the voice from heaven still says also to us: "Hear ye Him."

In Israel Moses and Elijah had been two spokesmen of God whom they were to

hear. They were the instruments of putting into effect His plan of salvation. Moses led his people out of the bondage of Egypt and made them the people of His gracious covenant promises. Elijah by word and deed called Israel back to be true to its purpose as the bearer of God's promise of salvation to the ends of the earth. The last verses of our Old Testament read: "Remember the law of My servant Moses. . . . Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet . . . and he will turn the hearts of fathers to their children and the hearts of children to their fathers." (Mal. 4:4-6 RSV)

Jesus Christ is *the* Word of God to men. Moses and Elijah, we are told, spoke to Jesus of the exodus He was to accomplish in Jerusalem. The presence of these prophets was to tell the disciples: Hear ye Him, Him through whom the kingdom of God is among you.

For the exodus from Egypt, great and glorious though it was, was merely an initial step toward the exodus that Jesus was to accomplish at Jerusalem. This manifestation of the glory of God is already anticipated in the Old Testament as infinitely greater than the redemption from Egypt. For we read in Jeremiah: "Therefore, behold, the days come, saith the Lord, that they shall no more say, The Lord liveth, which brought up the children of Israel out of the land of Egypt." (23:7)

On the Festival of the Transfiguration of our Lord we reach a point in the church year where we stand as on a vantage point midway between the glories of Christmas and Epiphany and the wonders of our Lord's exodus of Lent and Easter. We are being prepared to enter again the days of the holy Passion, to accompany

the transfigured Lord from the mount down into the valley and through the gloom, and to climb with Him the heights of His eternal glorification.

So we can say with Peter, "It is good to be here." The time came when Peter and the disciples no longer saw Him with their physical eyes. In fact, the mere experience of the outward presence on the mount did not prevent Peter from denying his Lord when He was at the point of carrying out His exodus. What is all-decisive is that we obey the voice from heaven: "Hear ye Him." And we do hear Him in the words of those who were His witnesses and of whom He said: "He that heareth you, heareth Me."

This voice from heaven has opened our unbelieving ears. His words by the power of the Holy Spirit have given us the mountaintop experience of faith. The Word made flesh tabernacles among and in us full of grace and truth. Life is different after this mountaintop experience in our hearts. For unlike the visual experience of the disciples it stays with us. It does not vanish. In Word and sacrament we mingle with Moses and Elijah, with Peter, James, and John. We are surrounded by these clouds of witnesses. The Mount of Transfiguration outwardly looked the same after the disciples had descended, but it was different for them. The transfigured Lord, tabernacling by faith in our hearts, also transfigures our lives. It transforms the dross of duty, the dullness of routine, even our sorrow and pain to shine in the light of His grace and truth.

But there is only one way if this transfiguration is to take place. No mountain that we can climb is high enough to escape the sordidness and the frustration that sur-

rounds us in this vale of tears. We cannot climb the mount ourselves. As in the case of Peter, James, and John, Jesus must take us up the Mount of Transfiguration. He must by His Holy Spirit give us the obedience to the voice from heaven: "Hear ye Him," the Word made flesh, who tabernacled among men, full of grace and truth. When we do hear Him, then no matter what the day brings, we can say: "It is good to be here." It is good even as we face the most grueling tasks, meet the most severe obstacles, suffer the greatest loss because diffused over it all is the transfiguring light of the transfigured Christ, who by faith tabernacles in us.

Let it be said every day not only: Jesus took with Him Peter, James, and John; but also: Jesus took me upon an exceeding high mountain.

III

IN THE NEW JERUSALEM

And I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth were passed away; and there was no more sea. And I John saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down from God out of heaven, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a great voice out of heaven saying, Behold, the tabernacle of God is with men, and He will dwell with them and they shall be His people, and God Himself shall be with them and be their God. And God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes; and there shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain, for the former things are passed away. (Rev. 21:1-4)

Moses and Elijah, who appeared on the Mount of Transfiguration, had during their sojourn on earth experienced God's tabernacling in a building made with hands. It was God's way of assuring the Israelites they could come into His presence and commune with Him no longer as sinners

under the curse of death and of His destroying fire, but as forgiven children, His people, reunited with their Father, their Creator, their Redeemer. Therefore the psalmist rejoiced: "How amiable are Thy tabernacles, O Lord of hosts."

The psalmist could say this because he, Moses, Elijah, and all who heeded their words lived by promise, expecting God's tabernacling among men in a more glorious manner. Peter, James, and John beheld that glory on the Mount of Transfiguration in the Word made flesh, in whom dwells all the fullness of the God-head bodily.

The tabernacles of Israel, made with hands, have crumbled into dust. But even the tabernacling of God in the Word made flesh was in a certain sense temporary, designed to be visible among men only for a certain period of years. There came a time when Peter, James, and John no longer saw this Tabernacle of God with their physical eyes. And so with the goodly fellowship of the prophets, with the glorious company of the apostles, we too live by faith, advent faith, looking forward to the promise of the revelation of God that one of the witnesses of the Transfiguration beheld in a vision of the future and describes in these words: "Behold, the tabernacle of God is with men."

There is no doubt that when this comes to pass we will indeed say with the psalmist: "How amiable are Thy tabernacles, O Lord of hosts," and with Peter: "Lord, it is good to be here." In fact it will be so good that human language breaks down in any attempt to describe it, for no human mind can grasp its meaning.

Have you tried to think it out what it will be like when God's tabernacle of the

new Jerusalem is among us? Can you at all begin to comprehend what it means that the tabernacle of God without any restriction is with men? We to whom God in spite of our faith often seems so far away, we who like Paul must say: While we are still in this tent, this tabernacle of the body, we sigh with anxiety (1 Cor. 5:4), we who in our weakness have so many unfulfilled longings that we must say: My soul thirsteth, yea longeth for the living God; we can merely say:

Jerusalem the golden,
With milk and honey blest,
Beneath thy contemplation
Sink heart and voice opprest.
I know not, oh, I know not,
What joys await us there,
What radiancy of glory,
What bliss beyond compare.

All we need to know, however, to make us burst forth in such songs of rejoicing is what St. John tells us: God will tabernacle among us and He will be with us and we will be with Him. But to give us some inkling of what awaits us John continues by resorting to comparisons and figures of speech based on what we have and know now. The tabernacling of God will be in a new Jerusalem, he says, of pure gold, like pure clear glass, studded with jasper, sapphire, emerald, onyx, and every conceivable shining jewel.

Beyond this only negatives, an enumeration of things that will not be, are helpful in describing the unalloyed bliss of this transfiguration when God's tabernacle is among us and we are with Him in the new Jerusalem. It is the absence of all things which hurt us and make us unhappy now that thrills us with anticipation. For then, says John, God will wipe away all

tears from their eyes; and there will be no more death, neither sorrow nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain. For the former things are passed away.

More negatives: There will be nothing provisional or temporary in this tabernacling of God. Time will not exist to cut it short. There will be no sun or moon, and "the gates of it shall not be shut at all by day, for there shall be no night there" (vv.23,25). There will be the eternal present, the eternal "It is good to be here."

But can this all be for me? The psalmist of old already asked the question: "Who shall ascend into the hill of the Lord, or who shall stand in His holy place?" (Ps. 24:3). The answer the psalmist gives frightens me: "He that hath clean hands and a pure heart" (v.4). My hands are filthy and my heart is black. This cannot be for me. But it is. For I will be among those thousands and thousands before the throne whose robes are washed clean in the blood of the Lamb, the Word made flesh. He did not only talk about His exodus with Moses and Elijah, He fought the battle of my deliverance. He wore the scarlet robes of my sin and the sins of the world, and in the blood of the battle and by His victory of the empty tomb He washed them clean. "Jesus, Thy blood and righteousness My beauty are, my glorious dress; Midst flaming worlds, in these arrayed, With joy shall I lift up my head." "For Christ has entered, not into a sanctuary made with hands, . . . but into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God on our behalf." (Hebrews 9:24 RSV)

And what do we do now in this "advent" season while we wait for "the holy city,

the new Jerusalem coming down from God out of heaven"? Exactly what we shall do when it arrives. John in his vision saw that those whose robes were washed white "are before the throne of God and serve Him day and night in His temple." (Rev. 7:15)

We have the example of the men on the Mount of Transfiguration: Moses, Elijah, Peter, James, and John. While they waited, they brought to others the vision of the new Jerusalem and sought to keep them true to its promise. We have above all the perfect example of the transfigured Lord. He left the Mount of Transfiguration to work the work of Him who sent Him, to minister and to give His life a ransom for many.

There is nothing vague or uncertain about this service while we wait. Like Peter, James, and John we are told how to perform it. "Hear ye Him." So said the voice from heaven. And we hear Him when He speaks to us in the words of those whom He chose to be His witnesses. To John He said: "Write, for these words are true and faithful" (Rev.21:5). These words are not cunningly devised fables, says Peter, but "the prophetic word made more sure. You will do well to pay attention to this as to a lamp shining in a dark place until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts" (2 Peter 1:19 RSV). "Therefore gird up your minds, be sober, set your hope fully upon the grace that is coming to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ." (1 Peter 1:13 RSV)

And how long will it be? It may not be long. Peter, who had foolishly wanted to build tabernacles on the mount, says: "I think it meet, as long as I am in this

tabernacle, to stir you up by putting you in remembrance, knowing that shortly I must put off this my tabernacle" (2 Peter 1:13). And John heard the Lord of glory say: "Behold, I am coming soon. Blessed is he who keeps the words of the prophecy of this book." (Rev. 22:7 RSV)

We have again been with Moses, Elijah, Peter, James, and John on the Mount of Transfiguration. May the result be what it was for the disciples when it was all over: "They saw no one save Jesus only." When

this seeing by faith is among the former things that have passed away, we shall lift up our heads to see the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down from heaven, and hear a great voice out of heaven saying: "Behold, the tabernacle of God is with men, and He will dwell with them, and they shall be His people, and God Himself will be with them and be their God." (Rev. 21:3)

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