

✝ I preach in God's name for God's people. Let my words be from God and for God's people. **Amen**

Good evening.

We have just celebrated the Transfiguration of our Lord; his radiance and resplendence ends our season of Epiphany.

We saw that Jesus had come to *transfigure* not just water into wine, not even just his face and clothes into glory, but had come to *transfigure* Death into Life — for Death will soon be no more.

But not yet. Peter and James were martyred for their faith. John, though he died in old age, suffered immensely.

Peter and John both wrote letters to churches, letters to remind the churches the foundations of faith, to warn against the kinds of things that would cause them to abandon the faith. The apostles worked to strengthen the churches in faith in Jesus, and to warn believers from falling away — as Judas had.

None of the apostles took for granted that faith would flourish without preparation, without endurance, without encouragement, without warnings and exhortations, without worship, without suffering.

Lent means spring. Winter is waning; Spring will be here soon. And so, though it is true enough that Spring will come during Lent, I want us to think less of springtime weather and more of what brings about the springtime of the soul. For with Ash Wednesday comes the beginning of Lent, which is for the care of and the preparation of the soul.

I'm going to say something obvious — every person has a body and a soul. We know this. We can see our body, of course, and though we cannot see the soul, its presence is undeniable, its reality unassailable. And now I'll say another obvious thing: the body and the soul are not disconnected, different, but both belong to the same person. I have a soul and a body; both are mine; together both are *me*. Same as each of you. And now, for my third obvious thing: the soul and body matter, one to the other. They are not unrelated, but they affect one another.

I'm not proscribing a magic formula to heal your body through your soul, or to heal your soul through your body. What I'm doing instead is rejecting the opposite of this — I'm rejecting that there's *no connection between body and soul*.

To put it all together, if my body is sick, that has an effect on my soul. If my soul is sick, that has an effect on my body. If my body is well, that has an effect on my soul. If my soul is well, that has an effect on my body.

I can give you no promise that healing your soul will heal your body. The other direction, however, from body to soul, we can make claims about. And this direction makes sense, doesn't it? We have agency, responsibility, and a will which we can use on our body. We make decisions about what to eat or not to eat, what to do or not to do, how to spend our time or not to spend it. All of those are decisions we make using our body — and all of those decisions have effects, ultimately, on both our body and our soul.

"It is because we did not fast that we were banished from Paradise."

This truth, which comes to us from St. Basil the Great of the 4th century, reveals the timelessness of fasting. Even there in Paradise, there was something from which to refrain.

We know this to be true from experience. Some will say that desserts are always unhealthy. (You will not find me saying this.) Some will say that wine is always wrong. I will not make that claim either, given that our Lord Jesus made wine and drank wine.

But it is certainly true that wine isn't always a good thing. It can be had far too early in the day. Peter's defense of the Holy Spirit's coming relied on the obvious fact that the wine drinking — part of the feast of Pentecost — hadn't yet begun. So, wine can be had too early in the day. It can be had too much and too often. Drunkenness is a sin. And the type of wine can be used at the wrong time. A champagne is very appropriate for a wedding, but not quite so for a funeral. But port would do well, as it can help to stir up rich memories of the beloved.

Similarly, desserts are good. But they are not always good, and they are not always good for us. We can have too much of them too often. We can have desserts at the expense of something that might be better for us. And we can even have desserts when what would be best for us is nothing at all.

We do not need to always eat, always spend, always watch, always take, always let this or that simply happen. This is what we heard from Jesus in our Gospel lesson, isn't it?

When you give. When you pray. When you fast.

Giving, praying, fasting are *assumed*. And this evening I want to focus mostly just on *fasting*.

As far as I can discern, this congregation — you — are generous in giving and do spend time in prayer.

Of course, there may be some gathered here who are not giving — some who are able, but who are not giving generously. Or perhaps some who are giving, but not giving generously. So if that is you — if you are able but are not giving generously, then begin practicing giving.

There may also be some who gathered here who are not praying, some who know they need to get in the habit of prayer, to begin praying for their family and their church and themselves. Of if you do not have the habit of prayer, then begin to take time every day to pray. Make this your physical and spiritual discipline. Use the NALC Lenten devotional. Or even reach out to me and I can help you logistically make a plan to develop the habit of prayer. And I must add here, that *prayer* also means *worship*. If you do not have the habit of *regular worship*, that is the first place to begin.

As we heard, giving and praying are but two of the disciplines that our Lord *assumed* when he addressed the crowd from the mountain. And these same words he speaks now to us, for our hearts are open to him.

Fast. Fast because our Lord assumes we will. Fast because our ancestors Adam and Eve should have fasted from that fruit in the Garden, but did not. Fast because doing so in the body can indeed nurture our soul.

What we do in this body really can sicken, poison, and corrupt our soul. Remember our lesson from the *Parable of the Sower*, that the things of this world — the cares, the concerns, the riches, the pleasures — can and will lead us away from faith. We have likely seen trials which have led friends and family from the faith. But more than that, we have seen the ordinary, daily routines, cares, desires & pursuits lead our friends and family slowly, or quickly, out of faith.

And so, let us fast from this or from that so that we remain united together as this congregation holding fast in faith to our Lord Jesus.

If you always eat comforting food, then it may indeed be worth your while to fast from certain foods. Fasting is not just about eating healthier — though if that is what you need to do, that is a good thing in its own right. We want to fast from certain foods or drinks because desiring those pleasurable or comfortable foods can be dangerous. If we always eat what is pleasurable or desirable, what might we be tempted to eat with our minds or our souls? And so, we might want to change our eating habits so that we are not always treating desire like a vending machine that must be answered.

This principle applies, of course, to everything else. There has got to be something, I expect, that would be good for each one of us to fast from. Reflect again on treating *desire* like a vending machine. Is it food? Drinking? Is it

news? Fox? CNN? Facebook? Twitter? (That's what I'll be cutting down on.) TV? Media? Social Media? Amazon? Shopping? Something else? Perhaps even some sin?

We could just keep eating those comfort and pleasurable foods. We could just keep our habits as they are. We could just keep spending our time and money as is. We could just keep returning to the *desires* vending machine. But at what cost? At the cost of bodily health? Or, might we paying a spiritual cost? That is the real danger.

“Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal,

Every press of the button on that Desires or Pleasures Vending Machine gives us the treasure of this life. And then it is immediately spent and gone, and still our desires and pleasures pull at us, try to convince us that we need more news, more social media, more drink, more shopping, more comfort. It will never be enough. Always it will seek more from us, and no matter how much we give in, it will never be enough. And at the end of all of that, what will we have to show for it?

What will we have sacrificed by giving into these pleasures and comforts and desires instead of spending our mind, our money, and our time differently?

20 but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal. 21

We want to use the spiritual discipline of fasting this Lent as if it's a mechanic or a programmer working on our Desire Vending Machine. We want to change, in other words, *what* we desire. Or, to fully let the secret out, we want to change *who* we desire. We want to discipline our bodies so that we desire Jesus and the kinds of things he desires for us.

For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

To be with our Lord Jesus is both our eternal destiny and our mission in this life. Through his Cross — the one we wear not sullenly but gladly on our foreheads — he won for us his own undeserved death. And so, as we are reminded of our mortality, as we are reminded of dust and ash, we are reminded also of death's mortality, of Death's coming end. Death, because of *this* cross, will soon be no more. But not yet.

5 For this very reason, make every effort to supplement your faith with virtue, and virtue with knowledge, 6 and knowledge with self-control, and self-control with steadfastness, and steadfastness with godliness, 7 and godliness with brotherly affection, and brotherly affection with love. 8 For if these qualities are yours and are increasing, they keep you from being ineffective or unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ.

What is given up for Jesus is never given up in vain. All that is given up in this life is repaid a *hundredfold* in the life to come. Then forever, just as now, we shall join in songs of praise, for:

Christ the Lord is worthy of all worship and praise and glory and honor and majesty, now and forever. **Amen and amen.**