

"FACE TO FACE WITH GOD"

A Sermon By

Philip A. C. Clarke

Park Avenue United Methodist Church  
106 East 86th Street  
New York, New York 10028  
February 10, 1991

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### INTRODUCTION

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Then he began to pray, "O God...." Suddenly there was a voice...crisp and businesslike. The voice said, "Well...what is it?"

When the faithful worshippers came to Sunday services the next morning, they found the Bishop sprawled face down before the altar. When they turned him over, they sadly discovered he was dead. Lines of horror seemed to be etched upon his face. Fear? Shock? The good Bishop had advised others to approach God in prayer, but when he found himself "face to face" with the Almighty, it scared him literally to death.

### DEVELOPMENT

Today's scripture lesson reminds us of the time that the disciples of Jesus had a terrifying experience with God, "face to face". At least three of them. It was the "inner circle" consisting of Peter, James and John. They were with Jesus on a high mountain. Mark tells us simply that while they were in His presence, Jesus was "transfigured" before them. His garments became glistening, intensely white. And there appeared to them Elijah with Moses talking to Jesus. And Peter said to Jesus,

"Master, it is well that we are here. Let us make three booths, one for you and one for Moses and one for Elijah".

Mark tells us that Peter said this because,

"He did not know what to say....for they were exceedingly afraid".

Have you ever been so frightened, so afraid that all you could do was "babble"? People react differently to fear. Some become quite talkative, others become deathly silent. Fear brings out the best in some people while others have been known to crack under the strain. How do you react when frightened?

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The verses that follow Peter's mindless babbling are helpful and insightful to us in comprehending this event,

"And a cloud overshadowed them, and a voice came out of the cloud, 'This is My beloved Son; listen to Him.' And suddenly looking around they no longer saw any one with them but Jesus only".

The focus of the story ends where it must - on Jesus.

Herb Miller is a friend from student days in Edinburgh back in the mid-fifties and I read his book, Actions Speak Louder Than Verbs, with interest. In it he tells of the famous Chapel of Loretto in Santa Fe, New Mexico. Apparently the chapel contains a 25 foot high stairway that winds into the choir loft. This engineering miracle, with no supports except its own form, has withstood several hundred years of use. As a pastor and his wife entered the chapel on their tourist visit to Santa Fe, the pastor paid little attention to the giant, life-sized statue of Christ standing in a shadowy alcove on one wall. At a distance, it looks quite average. Shortly, however, the pastor felt a tug at his sleeve. It was his wife and she whispered softly to him,

Then, out of the dressing room came an army of "not so jolly" green giants who kept on coming and coming. The USC team panicked. Their coach reminded them that Rockne could only play eleven men at a time, but the damage was done. Even the band was affected. USC lost. They did not lose to the hundred men. They were beaten by their own fear.

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Gentle Jesus, meek and mild...how could anybody ever be afraid of Jesus? We have so sentimentalized this Man from Nazareth that we cannot even imagine grown men being afraid in His presence, but they were. And why not?

If He is who we say He is, who could help being fearful in His presence? I think I would be. Here, after all, was absolute purity and absolute love. Have you ever been in the presence of someone who was so perfect that they made you feel uncomfortable?

We talked last week about the "authority" of Jesus. "With authority He commands the unclean spirits". Have you ever been around anyone who spoke with authority? Vince Lombardi, legendary coach of the Green Bay Packers, they say use to speak with authority. Even his toughest linemen were no match against Lombardi. Said one player,

"When he says, 'sit down' I don't even bother to look for a chair. I just sit!"

Now I doubt very much that Jesus used the same leadership style that Vince Lombardi used. Only a couple of times, according to the Gospels, did He vent His anger. Still, Jesus could not have been the passive, non-threatening Casper Milquetoast sort of man that some have made Him out to be. Here was absolute purity and here was absolute love. These were the sources of His authority. This Transfiguration experience helps us focus in on the uniqueness and power of Jesus - His purity and His love. These were the "springs" of his moral authority.

#### THE KIND OF MAN HE WAS

Dwight David Eisenhower has always held a strong grip on the affections of the American people. I came across an incident in the papers recently that goes back to the Fall of '51 when Ike was running for President, an incident that was a bit of turning point in that campaign.

Eisenhower was scheduled to make a stop in Colorado prior to the Republican Convention. One of his supporters, a member of the Meat Cutters' Union and a veteran of the 101st Airborne invasion of Normandy Beach came up with an idea. How about an arrival lunch for 2,000 or more Ike supporters on the Friday before the Convention? How about if he and his union buddies assembled 50 paraplegic victims of the attack on Normandy in wheelchairs and on cots, with another 250 "walking wounded" front and center of the podium where Ike would be standing?

The idea was adopted and quickly put into action. Using a mobilized cheering

"Go over there and stand right under that statue and look up into its eyes. It will give you the strangest feeling".

He walked over, really expecting nothing of significance. But the steel blue eyes looking down at him seemed so real that he waited breathlessly for the figure to speak and correct his lack of observational skills. This was the main thing in that room, not the elaborate stairway, but the Christ.

CLOSING Mark tells us that the disciples,

"No longer saw any one with them but Jesus ONLY."

There's more to those words than we might suppose. All other concerns were overshadowed by the glory of what they had seen in that moment on the mountain top. Yes, quietly...they would make their way back down the mountain pondering the significance of all of this in their hearts. It was all too grand for them to get their little minds around. Even after the resurrection they would still be questioning...still be searching for understanding.

But surely after the experience on the Mount of Transfiguration their lives would be elevated...lifted up to a new level.

Maxie Dunnam tells a marvelous story out of the life of George Matheson, one of the great preachers of Scotland of another generation that gives us a "feel" for what this experience must have done for those three disciples - Peter, James and John. When Matheson came to one of the great Presbyterian churches in Edinburgh there was a woman in his congregation who lived in filthy conditions in a cellar.

After several months of Matheson's ministry, it came time for Communion in the life of that Church. Now in the Scots Presbyterian tradition, elders call on members of the congregation to sign them up for Communion. When the elder called at this woman's cellar with the card, he found her gone. After much effort, he tracked her down, finally locating her in an attic room. She was very poor. There were no luxuries. But the attic was light - as light and airy and as clean as the dark, damp cellar had been dirty and dismal.

The elder said to the woman,

"Aye...I see you've changed your house". "Aye" she said,  
"I have...for you canna hear George Matheson preach the  
Gospel and live in a cellar."

And hopefully that is true today for those who have experienced the reality of the transfigured and resurrected Christ? You "canna live in the cellar of life" after an experience like that.

The disciples would make their way back down into the valley of every day life with all of its demands, but a part of them would forever be on that mountain. Their fear had been transformed to faith. The focus of that faith was Christ and Christ alone. There may be some person present this hour who is living in the "cellar" of life with its fears, doubts, despair...I hope and pray that something this hour will lead you to the transfigured and resurrected Christ for even today He can still set your feet on a mountain top. So may it be for each of you.

PRAYER

Make us sensitive to Your nearness and Your presence in these quiet moments, O God. Let this hour be for each of us a "mountain-top" experience where we see and feel the very Presence of Christ, Your Son. May something of his absolute purity and His absolute love speak with authority in our hearts. May we feel something here that will suggest to us in the days of this week as we go back into the valley of every day living that we have seen and felt You "face to face". In the spirit of Christ, Our Lord, we pray. Amen.

LORD...so often in life we resist being reminded of our condition. But deep down, we know that we keep falling short of our good intentions.

Even though we have heard many, many times that love is the answer, we keep falling back into little ruts of selfishness.

Even though we know it's best to try to live one day at a time, we keep worrying about tomorrow and what it will bring.

Even though we know it's better to listen when others speak, we keep slipping back into the posture of defensiveness and strike back with words and unkind expressions.

THIS IS WHY WE come here and why we confess our needs to YOU, O Lord.

We need to be reminded that in mercy You do reach down and help us to get back on our feet...on the high road.

We need to be assured that what we have done is forgiven, because You never give up on any of us...no matter what we've done or how far we've wandered off the high road.

We need those times when we affirm our faith in You and in each other.

We need to have our hopes of the "abundant life" of which Jesus spoke reinforced through Your lifting word from Scriptures.

COME AMONG US IN OUR WORSHIP, LORD. Wrestle with each of us deep inside till we are conquered by Your spirit. Minister to our needs.

YES...if we need to be challenged - and some of us certainly do - come and upset those comfortable ruts into which we find ourselves slipping.

YES...if we need to be healed where we hurt - and some of us do - come gently and caress our spirits...restore to us a healthy mind and a wholesome spirit.

THEN TURN US OUT to minister to the needs of others, even as You minister to us through others. Visit our sick and hurting with the quiet assurance of Thy care.

Help us to know how to deal gently with those around us who are hurting in body, mind or spirit.

Enable us to have a bit of courage to confront sinful ways, selfish living.

UNITE US in these moments of quietness with a new sense of community, with a new spirit of compassion, with a stronger sense of commitment to Christ, in whom we have come to find life's deepest meaning as well as its highest hopes.

In His spirit we now pray.

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### INTRODUCTION

Today we are dealing with a subject that touches us all. It is temptation. None of us is too old or too young, too sophisticated or too naive, to escape the snare of the tempter. Temptation can lead us into all kinds of trouble and all kinds of problems.

### DEVELOPMENT

For instance there was a story in the papers not too long ago about an Alabama man who carefully planned a simple robbery. He entered a house in broad daylight and began clearing out the valuables. In doing so he came across a gun and accidentally shot himself in the calf as he was looking it over. Quite obviously he could not risk taking himself to a hospital.

It was about this time that the woman who lived at that address returned home from her shopping. The burglar had no choice but to tie her up and that added seriously to his original offense of breaking and entering.

Now wounded, the man needed a car and so he stole the car belonging to the woman he had tied up. Grand auto-theft. However, the pain and loss of blood from his leg wound was causing him to drive rather erratically. It caught the attention of a police officer. The burglar pulled off the road in his stolen car and the policeman pulled up behind him. The fleeing criminal, now getting more and more desperate, shot through the windshield of the patrol car and wounded the officer. However, the patrol car was still moving forward and somehow managed to run over the burglar.

The car didn't do much damage because the burglar was in a ditch as the police car passed over him, neither that nor the complication of the attempted shooting of the policeman helped to "make his day".

Next, the Alabama man fled into the nearby woods on foot. Somewhere back in the woods, he apparently came close to a moonshine still or a marijuana patch. At least that was the best explanation offered up for why someone put three .22 caliber slugs in his posterior. Now, obviously in no shape to walk, he stole another vehicle. He had to crawl a ways to get to the car.

When the police finally caught up with him, he had been shot four times and run over once. He faced charges for attempted murder, armed robbery, assault with a deadly weapon, two counts of grand auto-theft, and a host of lesser crimes. All this in an attempt to cover up a burglary! Now this is a true story with no exaggeration. It reminds us that temptation is a very real fact in our lives and it brings all matters of complications into our lives.

Today's scripture lesson reminds us that Jesus was victorious over the tempter. And how I wish it could be that way for each of us. Temptation.

### A MIRACLE OF RESTRAINT

The Russian novelist, Feodor Dostoyevsky, made this Temptation scene a centerpiece in his master work, The Brothers Karamazov. Ivan Karamazov calls the Temptation the most stupendous miracle on earth: the miracle of restraint. If He had yielded to the Temptation, Jesus would have been a very popular figure, not just with Satan but with all Israel. He would have established Himself beyond dispute.

Just imagine for a moment - stones turned to bread to feed the hungry, a spectacular descent from the pinnacle of the Temple as the crowds gasped in amazement and awe, and finally political appeasement as the foundation of the Kingdom program rather than righteousness and justice. According to Dostoyevsky's view, Satan offered Christ three easy means of inciting belief - miracle, mystery and authority - and Christ refused all three. Again, I say, I wish we could all be so fortunate when temptation confronts us!

REALITY OF TEMPTATION IN OUR LIVES

acknowledging, first-off, the reality of temptation in our lives.

Let's "dig" into this traditional First Sunday of Lent scripture by

None of us is beyond temptation. It is a foolish Christian who treats temptation as no threat, believing he cannot fall. We are all susceptible at times, and if we are not vulnerable in one area, watch out - we usually are in some other area of our lives.

During the early days of the Civil War we were recently told that body armor became a bit of a fad, especially in the north. Some of this body armor did not work very well. In other words, it failed to stop bullets. Some of it actually saved some lives, however. The danger lay in believing it made one invincible.

When the 21st Alabama unit was skirmishing with Union soldiers down in Mississippi, one Union soldier was boldly exposing himself to fire from the rebels. He was wearing body armor. Twice Confederate sharpshooters hit him but with no effect. Then a third sharpshooter aimed for the soldier's head. That ended the matter.

Now only a fool deliberately exposes himself to gunfire or temptation! Better persons than you or I have given into the Siren's luring song. The Jim Bakkers and the Ivan Boeskys, and the scores of other prominent persons who have fallen to lust or greed or to any of our darker passions are no different than you or I. Put this down then as point one: temptation is a reality for all of us.

TEMPTATION SLIPS UP ON US BEFORE WE RECOGNIZE ITS SERIOUSNESS

slips up on us before we recognize the seriousness of it. This is point two.

Generally temptation

In her autobiography, Lauren Bacall described how she became romantically involved with Humphrey Bogart. Bogart was married at the time, but his marriage was going badly and his wife had a problem with alcohol. Bacall and Bogart were thrown into constant close contact filming the movie, To Have and Have Not. Bacall says,

"From the start of the movie, as Bogie and I got to know each other better - as the joking got more so - as we had more fun together - so the scenes changed little by little, our relationship strengthened on screen and involved us without our even knowing it."

Bacall's last comment is interesting. "Our relationship strengthened on screen and involved us without our even knowing it". Such is the powerful but sometimes gradual pull of romantic attraction. It is precisely because our romantic and sexual feelings build so strongly and silently that the Bible would



encourage us - yea, command us - to flee certain situations. And if we choose not to flee in the beginning, we really cannot claim later on that we don't know how we became involved in a situation that we shouldn't be involved in.

Remember that the Tempter in the Garden of Eden was a serpent. From the first pages of the Bible we are introduced to the way that sin comes into our lives. It slowly slips in and grabs a quiet foothold before we are aware of it. Temptation slips up on us before we recognize the seriousness of what is happening. Someone has put it this way:

"'Who's there?' I cried,  
'A little lonely sin!'  
'Enter' I said, And  
soon all hell was in."

#### THE ADDICTIVE NATURE OF TEMPTATION

The third thing we need to see is the "addictive" nature of temptation.

There is something about the very nature of temptation that not only makes it initially attractive, but keeps us coming back for more. Even when the initial thrill has worn off we find ourselves mired in the muck of our own worse instincts.

It's sort of like an incident that occurred last Summer at Fun Town up in Maine not far from where we spend a couple of weeks. The Portland Press Herald wrote it up. It happened on one of those crazy rides that people pay to go on. Riders board these little cars to be spun around at high speed for about four minutes. We've all done it but I haven't done it in many years. Being dizzy and scared is apparently something for which people still pay good money. This ride, however, ceased to operate properly and could not be stopped for about 12 minutes. When people were finally rescued from their thrill, all were sick and some had to be taken to a nearby hospital.

Now, there is something exciting about certain areas that the Bible would tell us to avoid, but the excitement is an emotion one feels when he gets on the ride, not when he gets off. Ask the person whose adultery has cost him his marriage and the respect of his family and friends and colleagues. Ask the person whose carelessness with his company's funds has cost him his job. Ask the person who attends "Gamblers' Anonymous". A little leads to a lot and the end is a tragedy for all concerned.

#### AVOID TEMPTATION IN THE FIRST PLACE

This is all to say that the only effective way for most of us to deal

with temptation is to avoid it in the first place.

You see, we are not Jesus. He could go "eye ball to eye ball" with the Tempter and win. Every day there are many Christians who think they, too, can do the same...that they're strong enough to handle it, but find themselves, too late, weaker than they ever imagined. I say this as your pastor and friend. Some of us are strong. With God's help we can be victorious over temptation. For many of us though - perhaps the majority - victory will be the avoidance of temptation from the very beginning. Watch out for those demons. Walk away from them. Walk away from whatever it is that may be tempting you before it's too late.

Walk away from it!

An old Indian legend sums up something of our situation. Many years ago, Indian braves would go away in solitude to prepare for manhood. One would hike into a beautiful valley, green with trees, bright with flowers and there, as he looked up at the surrounding mountains, he noticed one rugged peak, capped with dazzling snow.

"I will test myself against that mountain" he thought to himself. He put on his buffalo-hide shirt, threw his blanket over his shoulder and set off to climb the rugged peak. When he reached the top, he stood on the rim of the world! He could see forever...and his heart filled with pride. But then he heard a rustle at his feet. Looking down he saw a snake. Before he could move, the snake spoke. It said,

"I am about to die. It is too cold for me up here, and there is no food. Put me under your shirt and take me down to the valley".

"No" said the youth. "I know your kind. You are a rattle-snake. If I pick you up, you will bite, and your bite will kill me."

"Not so" said the snake. "I will treat you differently. If you do this for me, I will not harm you."

The youth resisted for a while, but this was a very persuasive snake. At last the youth tucked it under his shirt and carried it down to the valley. And there he laid it down gently. Suddenly the snake coiled, rattled and leaped, biting him on the leg.

"But you promised" cried the youth in pain. "You knew what I was when you picked me up" said the snake and it slithered away...leaving the youth to die.

A PARABLE        It's a powerful little parable. The snake could be drugs, alcohol, extramarital sex, greed or a host of other attractions forbidden by God and by our good sense. Yes, the best protection any of us have is avoidance. Try to remember that and save yourself a lot of trouble.

We read in the Gospel that Jesus resisted the Tempter. "Angels came and ministered to Him". I like that line. Perhaps some of us can put ourselves in the presence of the Tempter and resist as well. But I'm not so sure. I wouldn't bet on it. Too much is at stake. Temptation is a reality in our lives and it slips up on us before we realize its seriousness. It can be so addictive, and even when it ceases being enjoyable, we find ourselves in its snare. So I say: the surest path to victory lies in avoidance.

That poor Alabama burglar sure found himself in a heap of trouble - shot four times, run over, arrested for auto theft, attempted murder, armed robbery, assault with a deadly weapon and a host of lesser crimes. All of this in an attempt to cover up a burglary. But that's the way it so often happens when we open the door only a tiny crack to temptation.

"Then Jesus said to him, 'Begone, Satan!.....then the devil left Him, and behold, angels came and ministered to Him."

PRAYER

Lord, in the quiet of this hour before You, we thank You for those "angels" that have ministered to us in moments of temptation.

Like Jesus, help us to say "Begone Satan" when we are being tempted and tested. Show us the relevance of Christ in the wilderness....being tempted... for the life that we live within and the world we make for others.

- If we can recall a time when we loved You more, restore.
- If we have become good friends with some favorite sin, rebuke.
- If the flame of our commitment to the world's great need flickers dimly, rekindle.
- If along the way a relationship once cherished stands endangered through some careless word or action - real or imagined - reunite.

We would pause this day and this hour to ask for a surer knowledge of who we are and of what we are all about. In the spirit of Christ whom we call Lord and profess to follow, we pray. Amen.

ANNOUNCEMENTS: Sunday, February 17, 1991

FIRST SUNDAY OF LENT

Today is the First Sunday of Lent. At this time of year the winds of faith begin to sweep across our city...caressing the heart of many a believer. The words of Phillips Brooks come to mind. Spoken to his Boston parish a hundred years ago, he said:

"My friend. Lent is here. There is no magic in its days. It is only that we have resolved till Easter to give more time and thought to our religious life. All this may come to much, or it may come to nothing. I beg of you - let it come to much".

We celebrated Ash Wednesday several days ago and quite a few of you stopped by for a "quiet time" and communion at the altar. Copies of the devotional booklet, The Sanctuary, are available in the narthex. A few remain. Also, take along a love loaf for your Lenten offering for the homeless...the hungry of our neighborhood. Most of what is received in the "love loaves" will go to the support of the Saturday Feeding program that we sponsor with the Park Avenue Christian Church.

"I beg of you...to let" your Lenten observance come to much.

PARISH CONCERNS

Note the parish concerns listed in the bulletin. The "Hounds" meet on Tuesday evening. Aldersgate meets on Wednesday evening. The Finance Committee meets on Thursday night at 7:30 pm. Sorry we missed getting that in the bulletin.

And don't forget to "sign up" for the Adult Fellowship Progressive Supper...Saturday evening. Details are in the bulletin. And next Sunday will be special for two reasons: the art display on the third floor as a part of the coffee hour, and the annual meeting of the United Methodist Women at one o'clock following the coffee hour. I'm looking forward to both occasions.

GREETING / VISITORS

A word of greeting to the visitors who have joined us in worship this morning. Pleased. Join us for coffee downstairs. Be free in sharing your name. Fill out. Sign one. Come and worship with us on other Sundays. Work with us, too....

Doing the Lord's work here since 1837. Roots are deep. Next month, March 10th, we celebrate our 154th birthday. If you'd like to learn more about the church, join us here at the chancel steps following... Members, wear name tags downstairs.

OFFERING

"More blessed to give than to received". In this spirit...

PASTORAL PRAYER: February 17, 1991

ETERNAL GOD - creator of the universe and father of our spirits - in reverence, we have come here this day seeking Your presence.

SPEAK TO US in this hour of eternal things, that through faith and trust, through the comfort and the reassurance of the Scriptures, we may have hope and be lifted above our own private concerns and anxieties into the light and the peace of Your abiding presence.

WE COME TO YOU, O GOD, because we have minds that seek to understand the ultimate meanings of life. For we find it difficult to simply believe that life is blind process, without purpose and meaning, without order and intelligence - a creation without a Creator. Only when we find in You the power that is behind all, the purpose that crowns all, do our restless and searching spirits find their rest in You.

WE COME TO YOU, O GOD, seeking forgiveness...well aware of our shortcomings, our sins of the body, of the disposition. Deep in our hearts we know there have been times when we have failed You, failed to live up to the highest and the best we know, times when we have let trivial things crowd you out of the picture. Cleanse us, and renew a right spirit within us.

WE COME TO YOU, O GOD, because we have suffered. Hardship, grief, illness, loneliness have touched our lives. We cry for the comfort of your nearness, the warmth of your love, for your word that "all things do work together for good" and that "all things are possible"

GRANT EACH OF US the vision to understand,  
the patience to endure,  
the strength to resist temptation,  
the power to bear our burdens,  
the willingness to help carry the burdens of others.

WE COME TO YOU, O GOD, because we are co-workers with you for the common good, for the improvement of life for all your children. Help us to understand those things that make for peace.

AND HERE ON THIS FIRST SUNDAY OF LENT, we would make our own silent rededication of our lives to Christ, to those causes we believe in as followers of the Christ. Confirm within us the feelings of these moments, the certainties, resolutions and decisions. We pray that your spirit may work in us and through us that others may know who we are and to whom we belong. In the spirit of Christ, we pray.

Amen