



# FIRST (SCOTS) SERMONS

“SECRETS UNVEILED”

Scripture Lessons: Exodus 34:29-35; Luke 9:28-36

*This sermon was preached at First (Scots) Presbyterian Church in Charleston, South Carolina, by Dr. Daniel W. Massie on Sunday, February 14, 2010.*

I have told you on previous occasions that I love a good mystery. Mysteries are my preferred reading when I am on vacation and when my schedule allows me a few precious hours for pleasurable reading. But the truth is that nearly all of my reading is devoted to sermon or lesson preparation. I am not complaining mind you. I love Bible study and research as I engage in preaching and teaching, and I love this discipline for the same reason I love mysteries. Interpreting the words of the Bible, or the words spoken by or about Jesus, an exercise not unlike trying to solve a mystery. You see, Biblical interpretation that is accurate and helpful usually involves picking up on clues, finding connections, noticing nuances and following one's hunches, only to discover the gem of truth within an event recorded in sacred literature.

Scripture itself teaches us that it is only in asking, seeking and searching, and by relying upon the illumination of God's Holy Spirit that we can either see or embrace God's truth. The Bible speaks of truths from God, and wisdom from above, and “mysteries hidden for ages” that only come to light through God's revelation, the Spirit's illumination and our own willingness to work and look and listen.

Another related truth when it comes to discovering God's word and will is that we must read and interpret scripture in light of scripture itself. That is to say, scripture as a whole better enables us to translate scripture in its varied parts. The Bible is its own interpreter. And the more we are familiar with the whole sweep of scripture the better we are able to unravel the mysteries of isolated sayings or events.

And this brings me to that event in Jesus' life which we call the Transfiguration and which appears on the liturgical calendar for this Sunday of the year. This is a strange event to be sure. For years the Transfiguration baffled me and seemed almost nonsensical. David H. C. Read argued years ago that most of the gospel stories are recorded as any good journalist would record them. They seek to answer the questions of who, what, where, and when. Consequently, most people can generally read about the life and teachings of Jesus and have little trouble in understanding the story line. However, he pointed out, there are at least three exceptions to this general rule prior to the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus. And these events are Jesus' baptism in the Jordan River, his temptation in the wilderness, and his Transfiguration upon the mountain. These are not only perplexing and paranormal events, but apart from a grasp of the Hebrew scriptures one could never hope to understand their significance, or interpret the meaning behind these mysterious events.

Without going into detail, since I have devoted other sermons to these passages, let me just summarize by saying that in his baptism Jesus came to a greater awareness of his own identity as the son of God and his calling as God's suffering servant Messiah. The voice he hears from heaven confirms these truths and a mystery is revealed and a secret unveiled in the process. Had Jesus not recognized the words spoken from the Psalms and from Isaiah he would not have grasped the significance of what was occurring. But he did recognize the words spoken from the heavens and his identity and his mission were confirmed.

Immediately following the baptism Jesus is led into the wilderness and there during the three temptations the shape of his messianic ministry becomes all the clearer. He rejects the Tempter's efforts to influence him to be the kind of Messiah the people expected rather than the kind of Messiah God had called him to be. Clearly Jesus understood the relevance of the scriptures that he quoted and he also perceived how the people's expectations of the Messiah were at odds with his Father's expectations.

And then thirdly, again in summary form, what happened on the Mount of Transfiguration in that mystical and paranormal event is that the three disciples, Peter, James & John are allowed a brief glimpse into the glory of God shining in the face of Jesus. And then with the appearance of Moses, the lawgiver, and Elijah, the prophet, God was revealing to these three that Jesus was both the fulfillment of the Law and the Prophets.

Now what I would like to do this morning is to point out to you how the writers of the gospels, and indeed the writers of all the New Testament books, saw numerous connections between the Old and the New Testaments that helped to unravel the mysteries and unveil the secrets of what God was doing in the world, and especially in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus.

Clearly Jesus is the fulfillment of the hopes of Israel and if one does not know the story of Israel one can hardly understand or appreciate what God was doing in Jesus Christ or see how God's plan of salvation, the "mystery hidden throughout the ages and generations" according to Colossians (Colossians 1:26) was being brought to light.

The parallels between the two testaments are both striking and revealing. I have been making a list of these connections for years and it is a growing list that will never be exhausted, I am sure. Let me begin by mentioning this event called the Transfiguration and show how an understanding of what preceded this event in Israel's history will illumine and explain the revelation taking place at the time.

Peter, James & John have a vision of both Moses and Elijah and, as I indicated earlier, they surely would have recognized the one as the great Lawgiver and the other as the greatest of the Prophets. What was thus revealed to them and subsequently to us, was that Jesus was not only the fulfillment of the Law and the Prophets but now, in the providence and purposes of God, is the embodiment of God's new law, who fleshes out in his incarnate person what loving God and loving the neighbor looks like. In addition, Jesus is the true and final prophet, the one who speaks for and represents God to the people. The book of Hebrews will later present Jesus also as the perfect Priest who represents the people before God. The third great office in Israel, the King, is also fulfilled in the person in Jesus who is both the King of Kings and Lord of Lords. So then, all three offices within Israel, prophet, priest, & king are fulfilled in Jesus.

Staying with the Transfiguration, when the countenance of Jesus is transformed by a brilliant light we are given a reminder of how the glory (shkinah) of God also transformed the appearance of Moses on Mount Sinai when he received the law. So brilliant was Moses' appearance that he had to veil his face when he came off the mountain.

We read today Luke's version of the Transfiguration and, being a Gentile instead of a Jew, he even missed another connection to the experience of Moses. Luke says in 9:28 that it was "about eight days" before Jesus took the three disciples up the mountain. This was really a colloquial expression at the time which meant roughly a week's time. However the Jewish writers, Mark and Matthew who were steeped in the Hebrew Scriptures say clearly and intentionally that it was "after six days" that Jesus took the disciples up the mountain. Why? Because in Exodus 24:16 it was only after six days that God spoke to Moses out of the cloud on the mountain. So the gospel writers Mark & Matthew were drawing an intentional connection between the experience of Moses on Mt. Sinai and the experience of Jesus and the disciples on

the Mount of Transfiguration. This clue helps to interpret a later and similar event, both of which are indicative of the divine presence.

Additionally, a cloud is always a symbol of the presence of God, be it the cloud that led the Israelites through the wilderness, the cloud from which God spoke on Mt. Sinai, the cloud from which God spoke at Jesus' baptism, or the cloud on the Mount of Transfiguration. So you see, if one is not acquainted with what God has done and said in the past, with how God has revealed God's self, then one cannot fully appreciate or understand what God is doing in Jesus. And so without an Old Testament grounding one will have a difficult time unraveling what God is doing in the New Testament and in the person of Jesus. By the same token, a familiarity with the Old Testament will help to unveil the mysteries hidden within the New.

Now if you will bear with me for just a few minutes more, let me briefly point out some of the parallels between the Old and the New Testaments which I have been recording for years and which help us in our Biblical understanding and interpretation. And by no means is this an exhaustive list. Neither is this a novel idea. Irenaeus, an early church father, was among the first to state how many events in the ministry of Jesus and in the life of the church recapitulate events that took place in the history of ancient Israel. But here are some parallels that I have noted:

King David was born in Bethlehem.  
King Jesus, David's descendent, was born in Bethlehem.

In Exodus 4:22 we read that the Egyptian Pharaoh tries to kill Israel who is referred to as the "first born son".  
King Herod tries to kill the new first born son of God in Matthew 2.

In the Old Testament Israel goes up from Canaan to Egypt during a famine and according to Hosea 11 God calls Israel out of Egypt.  
Jesus flees to Egypt also because of Herod's threat, albeit in the arms of his parents, and we read in Matthew 2 that God calls Jesus out of Egypt.

In the Old Testament God's people are enslaved in Egypt.  
In the New Testament God's people are enslaved to sin and death.

In the Old Testament God brings the redeemed children through the waters of the Red Sea.  
In the New Testament God brings the redeemed children through the waters of baptism.

Israel is tested in the wilderness for 40 years.  
Jesus is tested in the wilderness for 40 days.

The Law is given on Mt. Sinai.  
The new Law is given on the Mt. of Beatitudes.

There are two tablets for the law specifying the duties to God and to neighbor.  
Jesus summarizes the law as the love of God and the love of neighborhood.

In the Old Testament God resides among his people in the tabernacle and the temple.  
In the New Testament God dwells among his people in Jesus through the Holy Spirit.

In the Old Testament God is referred to as Emmanuel.  
Jesus is called Emmanuel in the New Testament.

In the Old Testament there is the death of the infants under Pharaoh but Moses is saved.  
In the New Testament there is the slaughter of the innocents under Herod, but Jesus is saved.

The Old Testament begins with the words “In the beginning”.  
The gospel of John begins in a similar fashion “In the beginning”.

In the Old Testament the Hebrew word Messiah means anointed.  
In the New Testament in Greek Christ means anointed.

In the Old Testament Moses is identified as the Deliverer and the Law Giver.  
In the New Testament Jesus is identified as both Deliverer and Law Giver.

In the Old Testament we have the 12 tribes of Israel.  
In the New Testament Jesus surrounds himself with 12 Apostles.

The old law was written on tablets of stone.  
The new law is written on tablets of the heart.

In the Old Testament we have the power of Pharaoh with which God’s people must contend.  
In the New Testament it is the power of Satan.

The Old Testament refers to the blood of the lamb in the Passover Feast.  
In the New Testament we have the blood of the lamb of God in the Eucharist.

In the Old Testament there is the paschal lamb.  
And in the New Testament also the paschal lamb, identified as Jesus.

In the Old Testament circumcision is the sign of the covenant.  
In the New Testament baptism becomes the new sign of God’s new covenant.

In the Old Testament the serpent is lifted up in the wilderness and the people in looking upon it are spared.  
In the New Testament the Son of Man is lifted up and it is in looking to him that salvation is found.

The primary event of redemption in the Old Testament is the exodus.  
In the New Testament the primary event is the resurrection and in Luke 9:31 the resurrection is spoken of in the word meaning “exodus” often translated as “departure”.

In the Old Testament we have manna in the wilderness.  
And in the New Testament Jesus is the Bread of Life.

In the Old Testament we have water in the wilderness that comes from the rock.  
And in the New Testament we have the living water in Jesus Christ.

Canaan is the promised land in the Old Testament.  
And in the New Testament the new Canaan is heaven, also called the promised land.

The Old Testament has Jerusalem.  
And the New Testament the New Jerusalem.

What Israel is in the Old Testament.

The Church is in the New Testament.

What the Tower of Babel is in the Old Testament.

The day of Pentecost is the reversal for in the New Testament.

The Old Testament has Elijah.

And in the New Testament John the Baptist is the new Elijah.

The Old Testament has the temple.

And in the New Testament the body of Christ is God's temple.

As in the first Adam all men die,

so in the New Testament, and in the second Adam according to Paul, all men are made alive.

Let me close now with a quote from F. F. Bruce in his book New Testament Development of Old Testament Themes.

In Jesus the promise is confirmed,  
the covenant is renewed,  
the prophecies are fulfilled,  
the law is vindicated,  
salvation is brought near,  
sacred history has reached its climax,  
the perfect sacrifice  
has been offered and accepted,  
the great priest over the household of God  
has taken his seat at God's right hand,  
the Prophet like Moses has been raised up,  
the Son of David reigns,  
the kingdom of God has been inaugurated,  
the Son of Man has received dominion  
from the Ancient of Days,  
the Servant of the Lord,  
having been smitten to death  
for his people's transgression  
and borne the sin of many,  
has accomplished the divine purpose,  
has seen light after the travail of his soul  
and is now exalted and extolled  
and made very high.

Amen.