

- According to St. Luke, chapter 9. Now about eight days after these sayings, Jesus took with Him Peter and John and James and went up upon the mountain to pray. And while He was praying, the appearance of His face changed and His clothes became dazzling white. Suddenly they saw two men, Moses and Elijah talking to Him. They appeared in glory and were speaking of His departure, which He was about to accomplish at Jerusalem. Now Peter and his companions were weighed down with sleep but since they had stayed awake, they saw His glory and the two men who stood with Him. Just as they were leaving Him, Peter said to Jesus, Master, it is good for us to be here. Let us make three dwellings, one for You, one for Moses and one for Elijah, not knowing what he said. While he was saying this, a cloud came and overshadowed them and they were terrified as they entered the cloud. Then from the cloud came a voice that said, This is My Son, My chosen. Listen to Him. When the voice had spoken, Jesus was found alone. And they kept silent and in those days told no one any of the things they had seen. This is the Word of the Lord.

- Thanks be to God.

- In the name of God the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost, amen. On Transfiguration Sunday, we celebrate a mountaintop experience and if you have listened to the gospel carefully, you will notice that no one understands it. You are in very good company. Peter, James and John on the mountaintop appearing with our Lord had no idea what was going on. Their only response to the phenomena of the transfiguration of our Lord was to say, It's good to be here. Let's do something. Let's build three churches. And even from this distance, we can tell what an inadequate, what an unacceptable, what a boring response to the transfiguration of Jesus Himself. And so they must come down from the mountaintop, they must turn over in their minds what they have seen and heard. And like the shepherds and the wise men, they must go down back into the world and get on with their work. Transfiguration Sunday is that mountaintop experience. Before we must go back into the world and get on with our work. Now if you are a connoisseur of sermon titles and you try to make some sense out of these teasing, enigmatic little lines with which preachers try to entice you as to the nature of their sermons, you may perhaps think that this morning I have taken on some millennial madness or some pre-millennial madness, some apocalyptic invitation to a consideration of the day of doom and wrath. That is why so many of you doubtless have come here this morning. (audience laughs) Now, there will be a lot of nonsense preached about the end of the age and the millennium and the day of doom as those days draw nearer and nearer to the years 2000 and 2001. In fact, the more prudent members of this administration here ought to make contingency plans for commencement in either of those years. I hope not to add to any of that nonsense and this morning my sermon is not about the end of the world or even about the end of your college career. It is about the fact that Lent begins this Wednesday, Ash Wednesday and you had better think about it and how you are going to keep it and how it is going to keep you before it's too late. Now until fairly recently, Lent was a very un-Protestant thing to do. I might even say an un-Methodist thing to do. Only Catholics, Episcopalians and a few Lutherans bothered very much with Lent at all. It was hardly heard of in the South and surely it was very rarely mentioned in university chapel setting such as this one or my own. But over the years, I have noticed that more and more

people want to do something for Lent. They want to be able to claim something of Lent's spiritual treasures and opportunities. They want to learn something for the quality of their souls during this 40 day period that the church permits us to focus upon the inward life. Now this is, of course, not true for everybody and there may be a fair number of Lent resisters here among you. There are those who also may include some of you who will recall the imposed disciplines of another time, the imposed disciplines of Lent, for example, the giving up of things. Remember when they would ask you "What are you giving up for Lent?" Anything that was pleasurable and normal and expendable, one gave up for Lent in order to share something of the suffering of Christ. That was the question, what are you giving up for Lent. For many in this self-obsessed culture, Lent was an exercise in self-reformation, self-affirmation, self-improvement, giving up candy, drink, smoke, movies or fatty foods. This abstinence has a long pedigree, a long history in the church. In the time of St. Augustine, for example, the faithful were enjoined to give up sex for Lent although Augustine warned them that they might look forward to Easter for very wrong reasons. (audience laughs) You might try it and see. (audience laughs) And one woman of my acquaintance over many years in grave frustration at all of this said that she was giving up Lent for Lent. (audience laughs) Now there's a certain kind of Protestant who, instead of giving things up decides to take things on for Lent. Spiritual athletes, we might call these, who go into a form of circuit training, making elaborate promises to read a long list of improving and important books, perhaps even the Bible and to read it from cover to cover. Some will attempt difficult tasks, working in a food pantry or in a homeless shelter or writing their own spiritual autobiography daily. All of this doing and the ceasing from doing is an honest effort in my opinion to take advantage of these 40 days and to try to use them for the deepening of our spiritual lives. This is what Jesus did in the wilderness as we shall hear in next Sunday's gospel of His time of temptation in the wilderness. And this is what generations of our fellow believers have sought permission to do for the past 2000 years. Many of you will be among those this year who will seek to exercise the permission of Lent, to extract some meaning, some service out of it for yourselves. But if experience is any teacher, you will be frustrated in your efforts and ambitions unless you take time to prepare before it is too late. Frustration, you see, is the theme of the lessons today designed to draw our attention to the transfiguration. There they were, Jesus, James, John and Peter, the glory of the Lord shone around about them. They saw Moses and Elijah, brilliant light, great shadows, tremendous transformation, a terrific and glorious moment. They saw Jesus transfigured, a hint of who He really was and who He was really to become. But they couldn't make sense of it. They were not prepared for it. It was too great for them. They were overwhelmed and underprepared. In short, they were frustrated at an opportunity come and gone. They stood amazed in the presence of Jesus the Nazarene and they did not know what to do, what to think or what to say. Genuine moments of ecstasy are like that and genuine moments of ecstasy are easily ruined when somebody either asks for or attempts to supply an explanation. Lent is the season in which to contemplate the encounter with holy things, in which to experience for ourselves both transformation and transfiguration. That is why the lessons for today are given to us on the eve of the season of reflection and redemption. We should take advantage of that opportunity before it's too late and for the sake of our souls. And it is for that sake that I speak to you today. Now let me be eminently practical. Were I preaching this morning in my own pulpit in Harvard Yard in Cambridge and speaking to my own people, my own parishioners sitting before me, I would tell them as I am about to tell you how to keep a good Lent. You need to think about it. You need to prepare for it if you have not already done so and you need to have your mind and your souls and your program in readiness before Wednesday. You have to prepare to take advantage of what the church offers you. Otherwise it will come upon you,

these 40 days, they will come, they will go, another season will be lost and you will continue to be frustrated in the moment of great opportunity. And so with a sense, I hope, of pastoral guidance for you, I'm going to suggest three things that you undertake for Lent. Three things that you incorporate into your routine over the course of the 40 days that are about to dawn. Three things that are doable, that are practical, and that have an advantage for your spiritual growth. I give you these now before it is too late. They will be easy to remember because they all start with the letter S. The first of these is silence. The second of these is study. And the third of these is service. Keep silence during Lent. It is the first and in my opinion, the chiefest of the Lenten virtues. Silence invites us to conquer the tongue, our own and others. Do you realize how noisy the world is? How busy and full of sound is that part of the world that you occupy. Your breakfast table, your living room, your office, your car. There is hardly any place in the world from which you can escape the constant sound of noise. In the average household, in the average church service, we do everything possible to fill up all of the silent spaces lest you encounter a moment of transfiguring silence. If God has a message for you, how can it possibly get through amidst all of the noise, all of the clutter, the clatter and the chatter? Life is filled with the constant buzz of cultural elevator music. God can't get through and you can't get out unless you decide that silence truly is golden, silence is not a luxury nor a discipline. It is in fact a spiritual necessity and you are going to give yourself some of it during your Lenten week. I invite you to consider the creative uses of silence during the 40 days of Lent. It may mean locking yourself in the bathroom. It may mean going to the basement or to the attic or to the garage. It may be inventing a place and a space. But wherever it is and whatever it is, it ought to be the venue for God and for you to communicate in the utter absence of sound, words or music. Silence is the first thing. Study is the second. Take up some organized plan for reading. An organized, reasonable and doable plan for reading. Don't try to take on something enormous like, I shall read the entire Bible from Genesis to Revelation. Most of you won't get through the end of the book of Exodus and then you will feel frustrated and angry and depleted. Take on something that is manageable, that will edify, that will instruct, that will inspire. Take up the Psalms, for example or some poetry, or even a work of contemplation. Go to your bookstore and look at the shelves. Don't just look at spirituality. There may be a biography or a memoir or a book of poetry that might be useful to you. Ask your bookstore dealer, ask Patsy Willimon. She'll tell you what you ought to look to and for, to read over the 40 days of Lent. But open your mind to go through some Lenten study time. Study is the second thing. The third thing is service. Service. Find something to do for somebody else. Some form of random kindness or service, not to save the world. You can't do that. But to save your souls. You can attempt that. Who is there you know who needs something that you can do? Find out and do it. Silence, study, service. These are three things that even you can do over the 40 days of Lent. Now Lent, as you may know, does not include Sundays. The Sundays are always feast days of the resurrection. They are days off from Lenten disciplines, obligations and abstinence. That means that you have six days in the week in which to keep Lent. In Memorial Church, we have found that 15 minutes per day devoted to one of these three disciplines is a set aside for our Lenten work. 15 minutes a day or 90 minutes a week. It is both reasonable and doable. You can do more but you ought not to do less. Think of it, 15 minutes a day for the cure of your souls. People spend at least that much trying to develop muscles in impossible places in their bodies. (audience laughs) Surely 15 minutes a day for the cultivation of your spiritual life cannot be too much. 90 minutes a week. Perhaps it would work out like this. On Monday, you consecrate 15 minutes of silence. On Tuesday, 15 minutes of devoted study. On Wednesday, 15 minutes of service. Thursday, it's silence again. Friday, it's study again. Saturday, it's service again. Now I can see some of moral jockeys out there, saying, That's hardly anything at

all. I spend that much time changing channels. (audience laughs) I know you do. (audience laughs) And what have you got to show for it? (audience laughs) Start small and if you're so spiritually sophisticated, take on more. But whatever you do, hold fast to that six day discipline. You will be amazed as to what happens with a little time faithfully dedicated to holy things. And Sunday is when the people of God gather together to encourage one another in that pilgrimage and in these efforts and to celebrate the deepening awareness that is going to come over you as you draw nearer to God and God draws nearer to you. Now I know that this is not exactly demanding. This is not flagellating the flesh. This is not offering burnt offerings. This is not putting your all on the altar. But would you decline to do what you can do in order to attempt something that you cannot or won't do? The object is to get us through to Easter so that when we celebrate the risen Lord in this place and in this house of Christian prayer, we too will have had some share in discovering the newness of life. Not only the newness of Christ's life but the newness of our own life in Christ. The disciplines of soul, the disciplines of spirit and the disciplines of mind are things that we can do, we can undertake and we too can stand amazed in the presence of Jesus the Nazarene. You must now come down from the mountaintop, back into the valley. How will you get from here to there? By silence, by study, by service and by the grace of God. Try it. Try it. What have you got to lose? And you have everything to gain. Let us pray. O gracious and loving God, help us to prepare ourselves for the long journey that is ahead. Keep our eyes on heavenly places. Keep our feet on the ground. Keep our mind and our spirits alive to service, study and silence. And walk with us from here to there, that we may awake and rise with Thee in newness of life on Easter Day. This we pray through the transfigured, crucified and risen Christ, amen.