Our Gospel reading for today, the one about the Transfiguration, is a little odd because it appears twice on the church calendar. One appearance is today, which is the last Sunday before Lent. The other occurrence is on August 6th, which is the feast of the Transfiguration and that kind of makes sense if you think about it. But it also leads to the question of why we read it today if it is not the feast of the Transfiguration. That is why on this last Sunday before Lent did the lectionary putter-togetherers think it was an essential reading? I cannot say definitively because I do not know any of those people but I can think of two reasons.

The first reason is logistical. Today is kind of the last big thing that happens in Mark’s Gospel before Jesus heads to Jerusalem, where he will be crucified. So, in one sense we are just kind of wrapping up the story before getting to Lent and Easter. The second reason has a little more to do with narrative structure. We are getting close to the events of Easter but before we do we need to fully understand who Jesus is. We need to know that Jesus is not just some guy who annoyed the chief priests and got crucified but rather that he was the Son of God who annoyed the chief priests and got crucified. That is a really necessary piece of information if we are to understand what happens in Lent, Holy Week and Easter. And, if nothing else, the Transfiguration vividly fills in this vital piece of information about who Jesus is and it does so in at least three ways. The first way is right there in the title; Jesus is physically transfigured. The text tells us, “His clothes became dazzling white, such as no one on earth could bleach them.” This is not something that happens to normal people, at least not in the part of Fresno where I grew up. Second, Jesus is with Moses and Elijah. To get a little English Major-y for a minute there is great symbolism in this. Moses represents the Law and Elijah represents the Prophets. Jesus being among them shows that he is the fulfillment of both the law and the prophets and the only way he could do this would be by being the Messiah. And third, just in case we are a little slow, God tells us the identity of Jesus by saying, “This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!” So now that we have firmly established who Jesus is the question becomes what are we supposed to take from the story of the Transfiguration besides a little knowledge? And my answer to this question is I don’t know.

I don’t say this to be flippant or because I got drunk and forgot to write a sermon. Rather I say this because not knowing what to do seems to be what the Biblical account tells us. Peter responds to the event by saying something about making dwellings for Jesus, Moses and Elijah and then the text says, “He did not know what to say.” There you have it Peter, the rock on which Jesus would build his church, did not know what to say so why should we have any pretensions that we do have something to say. The fact is there are some experiences where words cannot fully capture the meaning and it may be best when we are in a position like Peter, not knowing what to say, to not say anything. To simply take it all in. I know this may sound strange in our day and age where you can’t pull a recipe for gazpacho off the internet without first reading seven paragraphs about the author’s abuela and the little seaside restaurant in Andalucia where they had a mystical encounter with this chilled wonder of a soup. Silence is weird to us because we have so little of it, but it is actually a fully approved response to encountering the wonder of God. The Psalmist tells us to, “Be still, and know that I am God.” Mary after the birth of Jesus and the visit of the Magi did not say anything but instead pondered all of it “in her heart.” And the Proverbs go so far as to say, “Even a fool who keeps silent is considered wise.” Silence sometimes is not just an appropriate response but is perhaps the one that God is looking for. In answering what we are to take from the Transfiguration it might simply be that sometimes God wants reverent silence.

The 19th century author and naturalist Henry David Thoreau wrote, “We are in great haste to construct a magnetic telegraph from Maine to Texas: but Maine and Texas, it may be have nothing important to communicate.” We do not always have something to say and that is okay. It may seem, strange in our day and age where every second-rate celebrity and upper-middle class suburban mom have their own podcast, but it is still true. There is an old economic law which states if you want more of something make it cheaper. That is why people eat a lot more rice than foie gras. These days communicating with large numbers of people anywhere in the world is incredibly cheap but in all of this have we upped what it is we are communicating or are we sometimes just pumping out words like Peter did this morning? The fact of the matter is that there might be times where we have nothing to say and that is alright. In fact, it may be better than alright; it might be just what God wants.

I may have told this story before but I am getting to that age. When I was deployed in Qatar back in 2018, I lead the liturgical protestant service which was scheduled right after the non-liturgical Protestant service. That service always went long and when they finally finished, they would keep blaring their praise music. I finally had to explain to them that the people coming to the liturgical service wanted quiet, that is why they came early. Not so they could hear a funky version of the Arky Arky song. Silence can be a way to prepare for worship but it can also be an act of worship. God sometimes communicates with us in ways that go beyond words. In fact, there are many times where more is communicated in silence than is communicated in words. For example, the beauty of this worship space here at St. John Chrysostom is a silent testament to the beauty and grandeur of God. What Peter, James and John saw on the Mount of Transfiguration was a visual manifestation of God’s glory. It took no words. In fact, the words from Peter about construction projects detracted from what God was communicating. Silence is sometimes the place where we will come to see and understand the parts of God that words cannot capture.

Let me end with an old joke about silence. You may have heard it but it is a classic and if the great Father Peay is correct the joke dates from the 13th century. It goes like this: Back in the Middle Ages a novice entered a monastery. On his first day the abbot explained the rules. One of those rules was that there was no talking, except once a year when, during his review, the novice could say two words to the abbot. At the end of the first year the abbot finished his review and then told the novice he could now say his two words. The man said, “food cold.” Another year went by and it was again time for his review and for his two words. This time the man said, “bed hard.” After another year this man again came in for his review and when it was time for his two words he said, “I quit.” To which the abbot replied, “It doesn’t surprise me, you’ve done nothing but complain since you got here.”

Words are everywhere these days and silence is a very rare thing. But as we approach Lent remember to take some time in the quiet to reflect on the beauty and wonder of God almighty so that we may be his this day and forevermore.