

Text: [Luke 9:28-36 \(CEB\)](#)

Date: February 15, 2026

Title: “No Fossil Faith” – Transfiguration Sunday

Theme: The church isn’t meant to be a curated collection of fossil faith.

1

I know not everyone loves them
But I am a big fan of museums – really all types
Art, science, history
That sounds like a fun afternoon to me

I remember being a kid on my fifth-grade field trip
Going to Washington DC and spending the day in the
Smithsonian

I absolutely loved the Museum of Natural History
It was the first time I ever saw dinosaur skeletons
And what little kid doesn’t love dinosaurs?

Even as an adult, taking the kids to the Natural History Museum in
New York
I was still so excited

Did you know that New Jersey was one of the early hotbeds of
fossil discovery?

Before the American West became the prime spot, people were
digging up bones right around here

The first nearly complete dinosaur skeleton was unearthed in
Camden County in the 1850s

The species was called Hadrosaurus – after Haddonfield, where
the first example was found

That’s why there’s a dinosaur statue downtown

2

So, I was reflecting a little bit on museums and my love for
museums this week
And I suddenly had a realization that felt simultaneously profound
And kind of depressing

If you're in the museum business
You're in the business of paying homage to things that are dead

I mean, think about it
Art museums – almost always dead artists in there
History museums – you're going to see things like Abe Lincoln's
top hat
Natural history museums – you're seeing stuffed bears, the teeth
of ancient sharks, and dinosaur bones
Museums, on some level, are the abode of the dead
Where we go to observe fossils rather than anything living

3

Today's scripture is the story of the time Peter decided he wanted
to build a museum on top of a mountain

Luke 9 is a pivotal chapter in Luke's gospel
It contains the story – located just before this one – about how
Peter first confessed his belief that Jesus is God's Son

When we read "about 8 days after...these things"
"These things" refers to that event

So this story functions as a validation of Peter's faith
While praying on top of a mountain, Jesus' face is changed – he
glows from the inside

And the inner circle of disciples – Peter, James, and John – see
Jesus in his glory

They see him along with Moses and Elijah, two great prophets of
Israel's past
Whose reappearance was likewise prophesied as part of Israel's
future¹

What the disciples heard Jesus discussing with them was his
imminent “exodus” –
the English translation is “departure” – but the Greek word is
“exodus”

It's a term loaded with theological weight, because it reminds of
miracles, and freedom, but also resistance

The Exodus was the end of Israel's slavery in Egypt
But just as Israel did not flee Egypt without pain,
Jesus likewise will face his own opposition and trials

It's at this point I suspect that Peter may have begun to get
nervous

According to the scripture – Deuteronomy 34 – God gave Moses
a vision of the Promised Land from the peak of Mount Nebo
There was only one catch – Moses is told that he won't be the
one to lead the people there
In fact, upon seeing the vision, Moses dies – according to God's
command and purpose (Deuteronomy 34:1-8)

Likewise, the prophet Elijah is described not as dying but rather
being taken up into heaven in a whirlwind
By a chariot of fire and horses of fire
Again at God's command – not by his choice

So knowing these stories, I can't help but imagine Peter thinking:
"I guess this is it; if Moses & Elijah are here, I guess this is the
day Jesus leaves us"

And he begins fighting really hard to prevent that from happening

Which may help to explain his words – so out of keeping with the
moment:

"Jesus, it's so good for us to be here.

Let me set up three shrines: one for you, one for Moses, and one
for Elijah"²

If Jesus is leaving, Peter wants to be the one to build the museum

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We can't blame Peter

I'm sure he was thinking that "if this is what it takes to keep Jesus
around – I'll do whatever"

The problem is that museums, like fossils

They give you insight into what HAS been

But much less insight into what IS

You have to draw your own conclusions and make your own
connections

What I fear the church has often done is build shrines and
museums to other people's faith

Instead of giving us the tools to claim faith as our own

We overemphasize the role of the pastor in being the guide
around the museum

Who can explain the weird old stuff that's in all these cases

Who can tell you what those obscure references in the old hymns
are about, for example

When in reality, the heart of faith
And the most fruitful times in the ministry of the church
Have been where lay people –
Who really are the most vital force in the life of any congregation -
Have claimed their faith for themselves and moved beyond
 checking out the museum collection on Sunday morning
Into lives where faith becomes the motivating factor

To make the choice to invest themselves in Jesus' work in a
 hundred ways beyond Sunday
By serving the poor and those in need
By working for justice for God's people
By helping form our children and youth
By caring for those who are hurting and suffering

When the laity engage this work
The church becomes less and less of a museum
And more and more a place of vital faith
Where we see God at work around us
And begin writing new stories of Jesus' power

Through these stories, we hear the gospel from each other
We hear how Jesus is still alive in the world
Rather than just hearing the gospel from the pastor
Or just telling the same old stories about how the saints of old and
 how we *used* to do things

My least favorite part of any museum are all the signs that say,
"Do not touch"
Which I get – the museum is meant to preserve its collection
To care for its fossils and artifacts

But when all the energy is poured into preservation of what is
Where do we find the energy to embrace what could be?

Peter was ready to build a museum on top of the mountain
But if you keep reading the story
The minute Jesus descends the mountain
He's confronted by a parent asking Jesus to heal his son

And this should be a challenge to the church
A reminder that our work is not in maintaining the museum
But in seeing the need all around us
And responding to it

Museum churches become disengaged from their community
We live in a moment where people can't afford for us to do that
There's too much hurt out there
That the gospel can help to heal

5

So where do we start?
Well, this morning, we stand on the edge of Lent
A season of the year rich in opportunities for growth

I want to invite you during this season to worship fully
On Ash Wednesday, on Sundays, during Holy Week
That's a starting point

I also want to encourage you to join in the opportunities we have
to share the good news with each other
To talk about where we're seeing God at work in our own lives
Be part of the Tuesday night Zoom small group during March
Join Kate and me for morning devotions on Facebook

But even if you do nothing else
I want to encourage you to do this one thing
Find time to read the scripture and to pray

More than anything else, I believe this is how God grows our faith
and shapes our own commitment

You can use our daily devotional – or any daily devotional
Or you can just start reading
I'd suggest beginning with the gospel of Matthew
One chapter a day, and five minutes in prayer
See if it doesn't make a difference for you

We can't get by on a fossil faith
The stories of what God once did for other people
Are not enough to sustain us
And certainly not enough to meet the needs of the world

We need a living, breathing faith
Our own stories of Jesus' resurrection power

It's not enough to build some shrines
It's not enough to visit the museum

The world needs a church that's invested in something more than
a fossil faith

Amen.

By Joe Monahan, Medford UMC, Medford NJ

¹ See [Deuteronomy 18:15-18](#), which speaks of the appearance of “a prophet like Moses.” Likewise, [Malachi 4:5-6](#) speaks of God sending Elijah to announce the day of judgment.

² What he has in mind are the temporary shelters that Israel was commanded to live in during the Feast of Tabernacles (Leviticus 23:33-44). Tabernacles, or Sukkot, is a celebration occurring 6 months after Passover. It is a celebration of God's provision in the wilderness, hence its association with harvest. It is also a great time to give thanks for the Exodus itself.