

SECOND SUNDAY OF LENT

Some days you never forget: where you were, what you were doing, how that day transformed your life during the years that followed. What might be such a day for you? Perhaps it was the sleepy December Sunday when Pearl Harbor was bombed? Or the sparkling September day when the World Trade Center towers fell? Maybe it was the day that your future spouse said “yes” to your proposal? Or the day you felt your chest explode with the pain of a heart attack? Or was it the day your newborn daughter’s tiny hand wrapped around your finger? Or the wedding day, decades later, when you placed that daughter’s hand in to the hand of her groom? Some days we will never forget.

Our gospel lesson today tells us of just one of those days—an unforgettable day in the life of Jesus and 3 of his disciples. But first some background: Jesus had just told his disciples in plain language that the destination of their journey and his own life mission was to include suffering and death. Actually the idea of a suffering Messiah existed as a theological concept long before Jesus was born. Many Jews looked for a human and divine Messiah who would, as a descendant of King David, take on the mantle of a savior whose leadership would restore the people of Israel to their rightful place in the world. This means that this proclamation of the gospels was not some radical innovation, but a return to the fundamentals of the faith. Daniel 7 and Isaiah 53 are two of the foundational texts, but other ancient documents like First Enoch and Fourth Ezra make it clear that there was an expectation of a redeemer like Jesus.

Perhaps such knowledge was of a distant memory since the Apostles were stunned to hear this announcement and some of them even tried to convince Jesus to take an easier, less painful course. In reply, however, Jesus told them that his suffering and death would also be the course for them to follow as well, telling them that any follower of his must also be willing to take up a cross, be willing to forsake his hold on life, to be willing to lay down his life for the sake of being obedient to God the Father. This was certainly a sobering announcement, but Jesus would simply not water down the truth. And then immediately after these troubling words, Jesus retreated to a mountaintop, taking Peter, James and John with him. These are the same three disciples who were allowed to be private spectators to the miraculous raising of Jairus’s daughter from the dead. And the same three disciples who would be invited to go into the Garden of Gethsemane and watch Jesus agonize in prayer the night before he was to be arrested. Why these three? We do not actually know, but we do know that they were eyewitnesses to some of the highest and also some of the darkest moments in Jesus’ earthly life.

The climb up that mountain must have been both physically and emotionally exhausting, especially made more so due to the troubling glimpse into the future that Jesus had given them. But when they reached the summit, these weary disciples experienced an epiphany that brightened them, confused them and ultimately transformed them. Jesus began to glow with an otherworldly light. His face and clothing became as bright as the sun, washing out every other color around them, blinding them to any other sight. As they later realized, they were catching a glimpse of the glory of Jesus, as if peeking at the sun’s blinding brightness for a moment before turning away in pain. Also in that moment, the disciples saw Jesus flanked by Moses and Elijah, talking with them about the course of suffering that Jesus had set as his course to follow. What an amazing sight that must have been! Here were the two giants of the Old Testament: Moses, the greatest of the Lawgivers and Elijah, the greatest of the prophets. And in the middle, Jesus, who had come to fulfill both the Law and the prophets.

After all, Moses and Elijah were not only the twin towers of the Old Testament faith, they also shared a common understanding of the course that Jesus was to follow. Both Moses and Elijah had their faith forged in the wilderness, they both endured profound suffering, both experience rejection by the very people they were called to lead. Jesus' hope and his strength lay in the glory that awaited on the other side of the cross, on the far side of death's slammed door. For Jesus, the hope was not that God would rescue him **from** death, but that God's redemptive plan to rescue us would be enacted **by** his death.

And that hope was the light at the end of the dark tunnel of suffering that Jesus would enter. After all, he had a calling even higher than self-preservation. He was called to obedience to His Father's will and mission; that was his greatest joy, his only purpose, his guiding star. And that single-minded focus within Jesus made all the suffering worth the cost and all the potential distractions fade away. And to punctuate this moment even further, while the disciples were fumbling around for something significant to do or something profound to say, the voice of God clapped like thunder, with a repeat of the affirmation Jesus had heard on another unforgettable day, the day of his baptism. The voice of the Father said, once again, "This is my beloved Son, whom I love and with whom I am well pleased." And to the disciples present, the voice added, "Listen to him."

And then just as suddenly as it erupted, the brightness faded, the disciples regained their normal sight, Moses and Elijah vanished and Jesus was alone with them once again. But Peter, James and John would never be the same, not after that moment on the mountain. They would struggle still, as they tried to follow Jesus and to understand his curious and somber mission. But they would never forget that day when Jesus revealed his glory and when they heard God the Father affirm his mission. And like all great memorable days in our lives, the farther away they got from it, the clearer it became in their hearts—just as a mountain is easier to see from a distance rather than from up close.

And so, decades later John would write: "We have seen his glory." And toward the end of his life, Peter would write about this moment: "We were eyewitnesses of his majesty...so do not be afraid when you go through painful trials. But rejoice that you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed." As far as we know, James did not write about this day on the mountain, perhaps because he was the first of the disciples to suffer martyrdom and his life was cut short.

At the conclusion of the Transfiguration, Jesus tells the apostles to say nothing about this until after his resurrection—and ultimately, that is what they did. It is just the opposite for us as our response to this gospel passage has to be the re-telling of the story of this most memorable day.

But it is even more important that we live it and that in proclaiming Jesus, we reveal that part of Jesus that is hidden—sometimes deeply—in all of us. We are, all of us, eternal creatures, bearing the image of God. We ourselves are transfigured, transformed by the touch of Jesus hand.

This brings us back to our own journeys. When is a person transfigured? This happens when some quality comes to the surface, when some hidden potential comes to light. For me, whenever I think of the Transfiguration, I recall my Mother on her 65th birthday. I had come home to visit, only to find her totally jaundiced; she was as yellow as yellow could be. I immediately took her to a hospital. As I've mentioned before, my parents had a contentious relationship, with fighting being a regular occupation. My Mother always knew that I loved her, but she wasn't so sure about my Father. However when the doctor told us that she had a cancerous tumor and my Father fainted, well then she had a new

understanding of their relationship. That evening, I anointed her poor, yellow face and hands...and yet, she was beaming. Again she knew that I loved her, but given my Father's reaction to that horrifying news, she now knew, perhaps for the first time in years, that he loved her as well and that realization took away any fear of death that she may have had. Fortunately the so called cancerous tumor turned out to be a big gall stone and she lived for another 21 years. For reasons unknown, she lost her balance after the surgery and needed a walker whenever she went outside. My Father became her care-giver; I wish that I could say that they never fought again, but such was not the case; however when they did have their disagreements, there was now an underlying understanding of a love that existed between them. To my mind, my Mother was transfigured that day when my Father fainted and she was anointed; transfigured by the love of the two people she loved the most. But I must say that this transfiguration was mostly helped along by my Father's reaction to the doctor's dire announcement.

And so again, what about our own transfigurations, when love overpowers everything else in our lives? In the Transfiguration, the disciples were shown that Jesus was more than a carpenter's son. His real identity shown through and he invited them, and by extension us, to do the same. We have been taught to cover up, adapt ourselves, our behaviors and expectations, to fit in and in doing so, we sometimes stifle our true identity. But what is beneath the surface? We were baptized into union with Jesus and that should enable us to act differently—but only if we don't try to live out our lives according to the expectations of others. The expectations that should concern us are those that God has for us.

The gospel encourages us today to live by God's love working within our lives, no matter what challenges lie ahead. But for this to happen, we need to see beneath the surface of our daily lives in order to understand that the holy resides within us. We don't live in the rarefied air that exists on the tops of mountains, we live on the flat surfaces in the cities below, confronting the grind of daily labors and struggles. It is interesting and a little silly that Peter wanted to just stay up on the mountain, forgetting about the other Apostles, forgetting about why Jesus entered our world in the first place. He wanted to relive the experience over and over again, preserving the moment through a video-like experience. Peter just wasn't listening, not really. He was willing to forsake the future so that he could stay in the present. The Transfiguration took place just 6 days after Peter's proclamation that Jesus was the Messiah, just 6 days after Jesus took him to the woodshed when Peter tried to persuade him not follow that mission. For Peter, and I suspect for James and John, all this was sensory overload. Peter had this insight into who Jesus is, but had no understanding as to where that insight might lead. No more than a couple understands what marriage is all about on their wedding day. No more than Einstein envisioned what his theory of relativity would mean to the world. No more than Henry Ford could have imagined that his assembly line concept would one day lead to traffic jams miles long.

And so to live in the transfigured light, we must live in a time of naked faith. Lent is a time set aside in order to discover who we really are, a time to challenge us to set our standards a bit higher than what is comfortable for us and to do whatever it takes to live by those standards. Today's gospel directs every contemporary disciple to follow all the words and works of Jesus and thereby discover his message about life and salvation. At some point, each of us is invited to say, here I am Lord, I am here to do your will. In response, I have to ask: what could possibly be more important than opening our lives to being transfigured by God's love for us and then to allow that love to motivate us to be more loving towards our neighbor?