

Children

What color am I wearing today? (Violet or Purple) We wear this in two church seasons, which are? (Advent and Lent) It is the color of preparation? What are we preparing for now? (Easter) and in Advent (Christmas). What two colors do we use in the Christmas season? (Red and Green). What color do we use in Church for most of the year? (Green). Green is the color of hope and as Christians we are hopeful people. We are praying for this COVID pandemic to be over, that is hope. What is the other Christmas color? (Red). Red is the color of blood, of sacrifice. If you would cut your finger, even just a little bit, what would come out of the cut? That's right, blood. And what color is blood? Yes, it's red ... bright red. Christmas is the celebration of the birth of God's Son, Jesus. And Jesus came to this earth to live, and to die. Jesus died on the Cross to save us from our sins. He sacrificed himself, gave his blood, that we might belong to God forever. So with red, we remember to celebrate Christmas, and what it means for God to love us enough that he would sacrifice, give up his own Son. So red is a good color of Christmas. Do you know how to make purple? (Mix Red and Blue)

What was celebrated on Friday? (Stations of the Cross). This whole season is focused on Jesus' death on the cross. Jesus tells us to pick up our crosses. This means in this season that we should sacrifice for others. So when your sibling needs help, you help. When your parents need help, you help. Got the idea?

I

The readings begin this Sunday with the familiar story of Abraham and the sacrifice or near sacrifice of Isaac. Did you know the same story is found in the Quran but the major difference is that it is not Isaac but Ishmael who is the father of the Arabs and Isaac is the Father of the Jews. They both have the same father Abraham, Arabs and Jews – talk about sibling rivalry.

We have heard this story many, many times and have always focused on Abraham and his unwavering faith. It is quite a mystery how God could ask Abraham to do such a thing, to sacrifice his son. Human sacrifice and child sacrifice were abhorrent to God. This story is the foundation of why the Old Testament condemns this time and again. It is one of the reasons given for the Babylonian exile. If we stay at the fringe level of the story, it is quite difficult to understand how Abraham could be told to sacrifice his son, Isaac. But, if we go deeper, then we realize that the whole point of the story was the strength of Abraham's faith. He would trust in God no matter what was asked of him. God made him a promise of many children and if God said to sacrifice his only son, God would still keep his promises.

Changing the focus from Abraham to His son, Isaac. In *Genesis*, it seems clear that when he went up that mountain carrying the branches for a sacrificial fire, Isaac did not know his father's plans. As time went on, Jewish scholars saw Isaac as participating in God's plan for mankind through his father, Abraham. By the time of the Lord, scholars taught the people that Isaac was martyr. He was willing to die if this is what it would take for the covenant God made with Abraham to take place. The teachers of Jesus' time compared Isaac to the Jewish martyrs who died for their faith during the Maccabean revolt against the Syrians. *Second Maccabees* tells the story of the seven sons and the esteemed elder who would rather die than deny their faith and defile themselves. The scholars taught that like those martyrs, Isaac did not value his life over the completion of God's plan. Later, Christians would see in Isaac's carrying the wood for the sacrifice up the mountain a prophecy of Jesus carrying the cross up to Golgotha.

It is in this light that we can relate the story of Abraham and Isaac with the Transfiguration, today's Gospel. On that mountain of mystery, Jesus met with Moses and Elijah. Why Moses and Elijah? Moses was the lawgiver. During the Exodus he showed the Hebrews how they could serve God. He told them they were God's chosen people. God had a plan for them, one by which He would deliver them out of slavery and to a the place He set aside for them. The most important part of the Jewish bible, the five books of the Torah were attributed to Moses. Elijah was the greatest of the prophets. He was the one who did not die but was swept into heaven. He would come again when the time was right for God to complete his plan for mankind. The time had come on the mountain of the Transfiguration.

Jesus was there on that mountain. He was ready and willing to sacrifice himself for His Father's plan to become a reality. He would die for the good of all. His sacrifice would lead to the glory of the Kingdom of God. His life, obscure in the eyes of the world,

and His death, which the world would view as dishonorable, freed others, freed us, to live and die in grace.

What does all this mean to us? It means that as followers of Christ we also must offer ourselves up for the good of others. When Jesus said that we cannot be His followers unless we were ready to take up our crosses, He was not using symbolic imagery. He meant it. As Christians, we are called to sacrifice ourselves for others.

That means that we have to reject the world's diabolical egocentricity. Egocentricity is putting ourselves first before all others, the "It's all about number one, me." That is the way of the world. It is diabolical because the devil is determined to fight God's plan for us by using us against ourselves. The story of the Fall demonstrates this. The devil led Adam and Eve into ruin by getting them to put themselves before God. "Eat this and you will be gods." Their sin is continually repeated as the forces of evil win battle after battle with every person who chooses selfishness over love.

Putting others first, being charitable, is therefore not just a good thing to do, it is the necessary way of life for those who are called to eternal life. When parents put their children before themselves, they are not just being good parents, they are being great Christians. As St Augustine says we Christians don't have children, we have Christians. When husbands and wives put their spouses before themselves, they are not just being good husbands and wives, they are being great Christians. When we make time to help that elderly neighbor, we are not just being a good neighbor, we are being a great Christian. When we go to that hospital even though it is so difficult to see someone we love suffering, we are not just doing a good thing, we are being great Christians. When we have compassion on those that society is attacking or marginalizing knowing that many of our so-called friends will look down on us for associating with these people, we are being great Christians. When we sacrifice our wants for the needs of others, we are not just doing a wonderful thing; we are making the presence of Christ real in the world. We are participating in God's plan for mankind.

Something wonderful happens when we step out of ourselves and give ourselves to others. We receive more than we give. We have all realized that whenever we are truly charitable we feel a huge joy, a joy so real that we are convinced that what we did was insignificant to what we received. And we are correct. In those moments of joy we become one with the Lord. We are transfigured with Him. We become people completely different because we are happier, infinitely happier.

Just as the Transfiguration of the Lord was a touch of heaven and a foreshadowing of the glory to come, our own transfigurations are a touch of heaven and a tangible prediction of the eternal joy to come.

Lent is a time for us to take a close look at ourselves and consider what we have to do to conquer selfishness and sin in our own lives. The various exercises of Lent help us to dive deeper into our commitment to the Lord. Lent helps us to take those steps we need to be bound to God's plan.

We pray today for the grace to be part of the plan, part of the sacrifice, and part of the Glory.

Robert Louis Stevenson tells the story about a ship that was in serious trouble in a storm. A passenger on that ship, defying orders, made his way to the pilot, who seeing the fear on the passenger's face gave him a smile of assurance. Relieved, the traveler returned to his cabin and said, "I have seen the face of the pilot. He smiled and all is well."

There are times in life when we need to see our pilot face-to-face. That's what happened in this mystical story that the Church calls the Transfiguration of Christ. Peter, James and John were there. Moses and Elijah showed up from the past. They have an experience that is mystical and out of this world. I want to call to your attention Verse 8 that says, "Suddenly, when they looked around, they no longer saw anyone with them except Jesus."

"Turn you eyes upon Jesus
Look full in his wonderful face."

What would a glimpse of Christ himself mean to you today?

I. THE EXALTED CHRIST GIVES US A LIFT.

There is mystery in this story. It's an epiphany, a theophany, an experience of the glory of God, so much that the face of Jesus becomes radiant and his clothes are whiter than bleach could make them.

People pay big money for radiant faces these days. Face lifts are a thriving business. The only problem is that the soul has a way of seeping through. Maxwell Maltz is a plastic surgeon. He's in the business of lifting people's faces, but, Dr. Maltz says, "Even though I get marvelous results, patients are often not happy. I have come to realize that inner scars are much more difficult to remove than outer ones."

Could your soul use a lift today? Has depression, difficulty, duties and daily routines caused your soul to sag, your spirit to falter, your heart to sink? Christ came to lift us. Contemporary Christian artist, Tim Hughes, wrote a beautiful praise and worship song which goes:

"Light of the world you stepped down into darkness,
Opened my eyes; let me see.
Beauty that made the heart adore you,
Hope of life spent with you.
So, here I am to worship,
Here I am to bow down,
Here I am to say that you're my God.
You're altogether lovely,
Altogether worthy,
Altogether wonderful to me."

Have you seen Jesus like that? Could your soul use a lift today?

Maybe the lift you need is affirmation. In Verse 7 we read, "Then a cloud appeared and enveloped them, and a voice came from the cloud: 'This is my Son, whom I love. Listen to Him!'" We have heard this phrase from heaven before; it is there at the baptism of Jesus you remember, but we have a tendency to forget. Now, when Jesus is preparing to travel the road to Jerusalem to the cross, the heavens open one more time and the voice comes to remind His only Son, "You are my beloved child, you belong to Me."

One of life's biggest challenges is to remember that we are the beloved children of God. There are so many voices trying to tell us something different.

I walked into Upper Chesapeake Hospital this week to make a visit and a gentleman standing at the information desk said, "You're a preacher, aren't you?" My collar wasn't showing. "Well, yes," I replied. "How could you tell?" "Well, you walk like a preacher, talk like a preacher, look like a preacher; I just knew." Under my breath I prayed, "Lord, help me." Have so many years of doing this made me look this way? As Abraham Lincoln said everyman over 40 is responsible for his face. Thank goodness I don't have a dog to look like.

We can easily become what we do, what others think, a lifetime accumulation of successes and failures. That's why we need to hear another voice, the voice of God reminding us that we are his beloved children. We don't need to waste a lot of time trying to prove what already is. We just need to lean on His everlasting arms and abide in His unfailing love. We need to realize that nothing in all creation can separate us from the love of God which is ours in Christ Jesus. Remember who you are. Could your soul use a lift today?

II. THE EXALTED CHRIST GIVES US A LIFE.

Peter wanted to make a monument of this mystery. He wanted to build three shrines on the site so visitors for centuries would take note of what happened there, but Jesus will have none of it. In Verse 5, Peter says to Jesus, "Rabbi, it is good for us to be here. Let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses and one for Elijah" and then in Verse 6 the Scriptures say, ("He did not know what to say for they were terrified.") Fearful that he could say nothing, Peter just proposes an idea—a building project on the mountain. Oh, Jesus, this has been such a wonderful time in our lives we ought to put a museum up here and pilgrims for centuries would come. I can see them now, by the tour bus loads, they will gather here. We could charge admission and make little replicas of the temples we are building and they would buy them and take them back home as pilgrims do from place to place. Let's just stay up here. It is wonderful. Then Verse 9 says, "As they were coming down the mountain, Jesus gave them orders to keep quiet and go to work." Life is not lived on the mountain top. It's hammered out in the valleys among the people where they hurt and struggle and try to make up their minds what they are going to do. As He led them down the mountain He reminded them not to make a shrine out of this—just keep it to yourselves.

Discipleship is a daily decision to follow. Back in Chapter 8:34—John Peterson translates it, (Message Bible) "Anyone who intends to come with me has to let me lead. You're not in the driver's seat; I am. Follow me and I will show you how. Self help is no help at all." Stores are stocked with books on leadership. There is even a book entitled, Leadership for Dummies. If I attended one-tenth of the leadership seminars that come across my desk I would never be present to minister at the VA. We are a church and society obsessed with leadership.

Jesus had a different idea. He was interested in follower-ship. Before you lead, you must learn to follow. Able leaders emerge from the ranks of able followers. No wonder aggressive, self-starting, self-sufficient citizens of Baltimore/Perryville have difficulty becoming Christian disciples.

I believe it takes at least three things to be a follower.

A. TRUST

Jesus said to his disciples in John 14, "Trust in God. Trust also in me."

Trust is the glue that holds people together. When you trust a person, you have nothing to fear. You can relax, be safe, enjoy each other's company.

That's why it's troubling when people lose their trust in God. Where can they go?

B. TRUTH

Jesus asked his disciples, what's the word on the street? 'Who do people say I am?'

'They say John the Baptist, Elijah, a prophet.' Then He personalizes the question. 'What about you?' 'Who do you say I am?' Peter has his finest hour. "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God."

Followers are not sheep too dumb to have an opinion. Followers are not "yes people" who tell the leader only what he or she wants to hear. Followers speak the truth in love.

C. TEACHABLE SPIRIT

John 16:13 says, "The Holy Spirit will teach you all things."

There are some things we did not learn in kindergarten. People who know it all may not be as smart as they think they are. Did you ever try to teach somebody something who already knows it all? Tough assignment.

The value of an open mind is its receptivity to different thoughts, further logic, finer discernment.

Disciples know how to follow. Get a life-follow Jesus. What happens is down there where the interactions of people are going on and opinions are being formed and decided. If anyone wants to follow me, get out of the driver's seat and let me lead, says Jesus.

Disciples have a heart to help. "Jesus is greeted by a crowd in the valley" (Verse 14). In that crowd is a man with an epileptic son. When the seizures strike, the kid foams at the mouth, gnashes his teeth, becomes stiff as a board. The disciples tried to help the boy, but they were powerless. So the father says to Jesus, "If you can do anything, do it. Have a heart to help us" (Verse 22). Jesus does. It seems to me that's what disciples do. They have a heart and help.

Roy Hattersley is a columnist for a London newspaper. He is also an outspoken atheist. But covering the Katrina devastation on our Gulf Coast, the reporter made this observation. "There was a notable absence of rationalists' societies, free-thinker clubs, and atheists' associations, among volunteer relief workers. There was a notable presence of the Salvation Army, Catholic Charities and other faith-based groups digging through the rubbish trying to help." Then Roy Hattersley said this, "Christians are the most likely to take the risks and make the sacrifices involved in helping others, while others sit around and scoff at religious intellectual absurdity." Did you know all but one the chaplains who have won the medal of honor are Catholic. They seemingly are more willing to sacrifice for others. It is a tough act to follow let me tell you. (Newport story) Maybe we Christians haven't done enough to relieve the suffering of our brothers and sisters who have lost everything, but at least we have done something. That's what discipleship does. It gives you a heart to help. If you can do anything, Jesus, why don't you do it? Have a heart to help us.

Hattersley's reference to the Salvation Army caused me to recall the story of William Booth. He was a Methodist preacher, too, you know. "Willful Will" they called him, but Booth became disillusioned with the political wrangling of the Methodists. So he left the church and started a Christian mission in the poverty stricken East Side of London that

reached out to the worst. That Christian mission became the Salvation Army, which declared war on poverty and homelessness. Or, as William Booth said:

"While women weep, as they do now. I'll fight.

While children go hungry, as they do now, I'll fight.

While there remains one dark soul without the light of God,

I'll fight, I'll fight, I'll fight to the very end."

That was one hundred years ago. It seems like the kind of war all of us could get behind, the war on poverty, the war on homelessness. Maybe it's time for another William Booth. If you have a heart, help us. Discipleship is a matter of your heart.

"Turn your eyes upon Jesus,

Look full in His wonderful face.

He'll give you a lift.

He'll give you a life."

III

“Twins, a sister and brother were talking to each other in the womb. The little sister said to the little brother, ‘I believe that there is life after birth!’ Her brother protested: ‘No, no, this is all there is. This is a dark and cozy place, and we have nothing else to do but to cling on to the cord that feeds us.’ But the little girl insisted: ‘There must be something more than this dark place, there must be something else where there is light and freedom to move.’ Still she could not convince her twin brother. Then...after some silence, she said hesitantly: ‘I have something else to say, and I am afraid you won’t believe that either, but I think there is a mother!’ Her little brother now became furious: ‘A mother, a mother, what are you talking about? I have never seen a mother and neither have you. Who put that idea in your head? As I told you, this place is all we have so let’s be content.’ The little sister finally said: ‘Don’t you feel this pressure sometimes? Its really unpleasant and sometimes even painful.’ ‘Yes,’ he answered, ‘what’s special about that?’ ‘Well,’ the sister said, ‘I think this pressure is there to get us ready for another place, much more beautiful than this, where we will see our mother face to face! Don’t you think that’s exciting!’
(Unfortunately I do not know the source.)

In that story the twin brother did not believe there was anything beyond what he could see and hear and touch while his twin sister believed there was a life beyond what she could see and hear and touch. That story reminds me of life. We are like the twin sister, we say “we are only passing through,” meaning that this life is preparing for eternal life. We live in strange times with lots of tragedies and appalling accidents and many people dying young. During times like this we need more than ever to remember that our lives here on earth are a pilgrimage to God. We are sons and daughters of our heavenly Father since baptism. Like the girl in the womb who could not see her mother, we too believe that eternal life follows this life and that there is more to this life than we can see and hear and touch.

On the mountain Peter, James and John saw that there was more to Jesus than met the eye. During the transfiguration they got a glimpse of the future glory of Jesus’ resurrection. Like them we too get glimpses of the presence of God in our lives. We get glimpses of God in the love we receive from other people. We get glimpses of God when badly needed help suddenly comes to us from out of nowhere. We get glimpses of God when we look back over our lives and what we couldn’t understand in the past makes sense now. We see glimpses of God when we see someone making a sacrifice to help somebody else. We see glimpses of God in the beauty of a fine day, a nice beach or a beautiful sunrise or sunset. We see glimpses of God when a passage from the Bible or a homily strikes a cord in our hearts. We get a glimpse of God when we spend time in prayer and experience the loving presence of God in our lives. We get more than just a glimpse of God when we receive the body of Jesus in Holy Communion. The Transfiguration coming early in Lent encourages us to continue our Lenten penances because it reminds us of the glory of Jesus risen from the dead.

When Jesus and the disciples came down the mountain Jesus ordered them not to tell anyone about his transfiguration until after the Son of Man had risen from the dead. Of course they did not know what he meant. Unknown to them the glory of Jesus' transfiguration was preparing them to accept the scandal of the cross.

There are some great truths you only discover through experience. Recently, I ran across a "fascinating list" that carried this intriguing title: "Great Truths About Life That Little Children Have Learned." Let me share a few of these "great truths" with you.

- (1) "No matter how hard you try you cannot baptize a cat."
- (2) "When your mom is mad at your dad, don't let her brush your hair."
- (3) "Never ask your 3-year-old brother to hold a tomato... or an egg."
- (4) "You can't trust dogs to watch your food for you."
- (5) "Don't sneeze when somebody is cutting your hair."
- (6) "School lunches stick to the wall."
- (7) "You can't hide a piece of broccoli in a glass of milk."
- (8) "Never wear polka-dot underwear under white shorts... no matter how cute the underwear is."

They would understand this only afterwards when looking back. The good times take us through the bad times. So when our cross is heavy or when we are tempted to despair about the meaning of life, let us look beyond the pain of the present moment and remember those times when we got glimpses of God, those times when God sent us his consolations. Let us look beyond the pain of life and see the presence of God in our world, and the offer of life that God wants to make to each of us. Let us look beyond the illusion of happiness that this life offers to the real happiness that God offers us. Let us look beyond this world to eternal life with God. As we heard in the second reading today,

With me bear the hardships for the sake of the Good News, relying on the power of God who has saved us and called us to be holy. (2 Tim 1:8-9)

In our first reading we heard Abram being called by God to leave his present place and go to a new country. (Gen 12:1-4) He was seventy-five when called to leave his own country but he had to wait another twenty-five years for the promised son Isaac to be born so that the promise of future descendants could be fulfilled. That was a long wait. It was a long time for him to be continually looking beyond the present to the promise of God. With faith we can see what we cannot see with our eyes. The girl in the womb knew there was more to what she could see and hear and touch. On the mountain Peter, James and John looked beyond the appearance of Jesus and saw his future risen glory. Let us look beyond, and see that God is really with us. God has not left us on our own, God is with us.

Those personal experiences of God's love remind us that heaven is our destiny and that we too like Jesus will be transfigured after death. Paul wrote,

“our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we also await a savior, the Lord Jesus Christ. He will change our lowly body to conform with his glorified body ...” (Phil 3:20-21)

Jesus returns from the dead and meets his disciples in different places: the garden, the Emmaus Road, the seashore, the Upper Room. He witnesses to them that he is alive, this guy back from the dead with a body. He isn't content to send them a postcard from heaven: HAVING A GREAT TIME. WISH YOU WERE HERE. No. He shows up among them as his own witness. Not airy spirits or pious ghosts, but bodies like his own with wounds to show, bodies that witness to resurrection, threatening the world with life. For the only Easter some people may ever see is the Easter they see in you and me.

The transfiguration of Jesus on the mountain is also awaiting each of us after death. Why can we look forward to being transfigured after death like Jesus? Because we are baptized. When we were baptized God put his seal on us. What was that seal? The Holy Spirit. We were sealed with the Holy Spirit on the day we were baptized. We were marked out as God's property, belonging to God. Let us hold our heads high. When the media or your friends criticize the Church and make you look foolish because you are still a practicing Catholic, hold your head high. Because you have been baptized Jesus will transfigure our wretched bodies into copies of his glorious body. Can the media do that for you? No. They have not put the seal of the Holy Spirit on you. They have not marked you out for God, as God's property. They have not claimed you for God as his son or daughter. But when you were baptized you were sealed with the Holy Spirit as God's own child.

On the mountain Peter, James and John had a privileged experience of Jesus' transfiguration. Instead we are like the girl in the womb, living by faith and not by sight, believing that there is more to life than meets the eye. Therefore we can hold our heads high because we were sealed with God's Holy Spirit on the day we were baptized. We treasure those moments - little transfigurations - when we experience God's personal love for us, knowing that they tell us heaven is our destiny and that Jesus will transfigure our wretched bodies into copies of his glorious body.