

A sermon delivered by
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The Church of the Transfiguration
1 East 29th Street, New York, NY
Sunday, February 18, 2007
The Last Sunday after Epiphany

[Exodus 34:29-35](#)
[1 Corinthians 12:27-13:13](#)
[Luke 9:28-36](#)
[Psalm 99](#)

AMERICAN IDOL

American Idol - do you watch this show? I have to admit that I have watched all 5 seasons and I am currently watching the 6th. It is a TV phenomenon! And I can't help but brag a little bit about the talent that has come out of Alabama, my former place of residence: Ruben Studdard, season two winner; Bo Bice, season four semi-finalist; and Taylor Hicks, the season five winner.

What is the appeal of this show?

I think it has the same appeal as many great stories: someone that comes from humble beginnings reaches the top and gets all the glory. In many ways this is the American dream.

And we find ourselves connected to this person. We find a point of identification with the winner because we too have humble beginnings and hope to reach the top one day. We can imagine ourselves in their place.

TRANSFIGURATION TO EASTER (CONTEXT OF CHURCH YEAR)

The gospel story charts a similar path.

At Christmas we heard about a baby born in a manger – a feeding trough.

Today on the last Sunday after the Epiphany we hear about the Transfiguration on top of a mountain: a story of humble beginnings to glory.

But this is not JC's final glory; it is his first. And another is nearby – when he is resurrected from the dead on Easter; in-between all of this is a deep valley, a profound period of suffering. The Church calendar is set up to help us live this journey as well.

On Wednesday Lent will begin – a time of self-examination with a focus on our mortality. You will have ashes placed on your head and hear someone say, "Remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return."

Then we head into Holy Week where we commemorate the passion or suffering of Christ and his death. So that is the context of what is going on.

TRANSFIGURATION DEFINED

Today we are at the Transfiguration, which is a glorious moment in the life of Christ and a few disciples. It is when the divinity of Christ is made clear. We are left with no doubt that Jesus is God.

Peter has just acknowledged Jesus as the Christ of God, the messiah, the chosen one (Luke 9:28).

And then on top of the mountain Moses and Elijah appear, representing the Law and the Prophets, and we hear the voice of the Father says, "This is my son, my Chosen; listen to him."

The Transfiguration is about the transformation or metamorphosis of Jesus. It "shows us that his divinity was brilliantly revealed through his humanity. The Transfiguration was an epiphany of the . . . deity of Christ. Jesus' deified humanity is what human persons are called to be."¹ The theological term given to this is theosis and the Transfiguration is the primary symbol of it in the gospels.

So we continue to see the fullness of divinity and the fullness of humanity within the person of Christ. What we see is what we will become. We will be divinized and in so doing we shall become fully human.

GOOD NEWS AND BAD NEWS

This leaves us with some good news and some bad news.

Put simply:

Divinity = Glory

Humanity = Suffering

The point of all this may be found in the collect of the day:

"Grant that we, beholding by faith the light of his countenance (or his glory), may be strengthened to bear our cross (or suffering), and be changed into his likeness from glory to glory."

STRENGTH IN OUR SUFFERING

The point of this is that we may receive strength for our suffering by seeing the glory of God in Christ. Or, to quote the founder of this parish, Dr. George Houghton, "The TRANSFIGURATION testified beforehand the Sufferings of CHRIST in this world, and the Glory that should follow in another. . . . Glory and Gladness unending in another world, shall follow suffering and sorrow transitory in this world, if borne in the Name and for the sake of the LORD."²

¹ Accessed online at <http://www.stnicholaspx.org/articles/homilytransfiguration.php> (2/17/2007).

² George H. Houghton, *Forty-and-Five years: An Anniversary Sermon* (New York: P. F. McBreen, 1893), 25. Accessed online at <http://littlechurch.org/houghton.html> (2/17/2007).

I'd like to talk a little bit about both suffering and strength this morning.

SUFFERING

The bad news about humanity is that we must suffer. Why? Because, as Lent will vividly remind us, we are mortal, finite creatures that have expiration dates. We all know this on some level, but most of us, including me keep that thought at a distance.

Keeping it at distance has become much more difficult for me lately since I have been working as a hospital chaplain at Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center – a place full of suffering and death.

For the last several months I have been visiting a patient named Johnny who is 20 years old and has testicular cancer. He has been through 2 rounds of chemotherapy, but both have failed. He is now on an experimental treatment that is his last hope. He sits in his bed most days vacillating between feelings of hope and despair, like a pendulum swinging back and forth.

He hopes that he will beat this cancer – the same cancer that Lance Armstrong famously beat – and be able to achieve the goals and dreams he has for himself. He wants to go to college and study restaurant management and business, and then go to culinary school to learn to be a chef. He wants to open up his own fine dining establishment and bring joy to others by providing them with a great meal and a nice experience. He wants to get married and have children and see them grow up to do great things. He wants to travel the world and experience all that it has to offer.

On the harder days, however, he lies in that bed thinking torturous thoughts and feeling devastated. He agonizes about all the time he wasted in his mere 20 years of existence on this earth. But how could he have known that his life would be cut so short? He wonders if this is his fault somehow. Is God punishing me, he asks? Or am I just one the unluckiest persons on earth? Why me?

He suffers. One day not long ago after he received some very bad news we were talking. With tears in his eyes, shaking his head as to say no, and with the serious gaze of a man condemned to death, he said to me, "I don't want to die." There was a heavy silence between us as my teary eyes held his and I said, "I don't want you to die either, Johnny. I don't want you to die either."

But inevitably he will. And so will I. And so will you.

In 2005 at the Rock-N-Roll Hall of Fame Bo Diddely was asked "what was the blues?" He said, "Mr. Donald Trump's got the blues. He's got 'em cause he's got to keep it [referring to money]. I got the blues cause I got to get it. If you don't think you got the blues just keep living."

It is not the dying that seems to be the hard part. It is the suffering that all of us inevitably go through that precedes it.

MEANING IN THE SUFFERING

Victor Frankl, a holocaust survivor, said, “In some way, suffering ceases to be suffering at the moment it finds a meaning...”³

For Christians we find meaning in the suffering of Christ. And we find comfort in the body of Christ. I mean that in two ways: the body of Christ as the community of faith, and the body of Christ as communion.

THE BODY OF CHRIST AS COMMUNITY

The Church is called to love and help one another. We share in one another’s suffering.

In Rwanda there is a custom of sharing in one another’s distress. If someone is in danger she screams at the top of her lungs. If one of her neighbors hears her she is obligated to scream too. But not only scream. She is obligated to run to the one in distress or danger. In fact, the whole community is obligated by custom to do so. So in a matter of minutes the entire community is sharing in her distress and giving her support.⁴

This church, the community of faith, is a place and a people to share in one another’s distress and suffering.

THE BODY OF CHRIST AS COMMUNION

Comfort may also be found in communion. The Holy Eucharist gives us strength for our journey and unites us to God and one another.

CONCLUSION

Let us be sources of comfort for one another as we find meaning in the suffering of Christ and look to his glory as a source of strength.

³ Viktor E. Frankl, *Man’s Search for Meaning* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992) 117.

⁴ Philip Gourevitch, *We Wish to Inform You that Tomorrow We Will Be Killed with Our Families: Stories from Rwanda* (New York: Picador, 1998) 32-33.