

The Church of the Transfiguration
The Feast of the Transfiguration
Luke 9:28-36

Glory and Gladness, Suffering and Sadness

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Happy Feast of the Transfiguration! Today we celebrate our parish's "Feast of Title." That's just a fancy way of saying that we are observing the feast day that is associated with our parish's name.

As many of you know, I'm a big fan of church history as well as historical theology. I guess you could say that I'm a church history nerd. I love reading about all periods of church history – from the Patristic era to the Middle Ages to the Reformation to the contemporary church.

This week I had the pleasure of reading one of my favorite church historians of all time. Can you guess who this person might be? Could it be Eusebius? Could it be the Venerable Bede? Could it be the great Philip Schaff? The answer is no – it's not any of these individuals.

You actually know who this church historian is. That's because he's sitting right back there – it's Fr. Warren Platt! Last year, Fr. Platt published a wonderful history of our parish. If you haven't yet read it, I highly recommend it. Sometimes there's a copy of the book at the back of the church, and you can look at it during coffee hour.

Anyway, while I was reading Fr. Platt's history of Transfiguration this week, I realized there was something that I didn't know about our parish. Specifically, I never knew precisely why our parish was named Transfiguration when it was founded back in 1848.

Now of course I've heard general stories about why we were named "Transfiguration." However, I wasn't satisfied with generalities. I wanted historical facts. And, of course, Fr. Platt had the answer.

According to Fr. Platt, the answer lies in a sermon preached by our founding rector, Fr. George Houghton, on the 45th anniversary of his rectorship in 1893. (You can see a bust of Fr. Houghton right over there, to my left.) In that sermon, Fr. Houghton explained that he and the six founding members of the parish chose the name Transfiguration for two main reasons.

First, there was no other parish in the entire Episcopal Church – or the broader Anglican Communion – that was named for the Transfiguration. (Today, some 174 years later, there are approximately 30 such parishes in the Episcopal Church.)

But second, and more importantly, the Transfiguration reminded them that, despite the fact that there was much suffering and sadness in the world, the glory and gladness of Jesus Christ would ultimately prevail.

Fr. Houghton summarized this in a wonderful saying: “Glory and gladness shall follow suffering and sadness.” I really love that saying. Let me say it again. “Glory and gladness shall follow suffering and sadness.”

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Now as much as I love Fr. Houghton’s saying about the Transfiguration, however, there is a slight problem. When you and I think of the Transfiguration, we normally don’t think about suffering and sadness.

Sure, there’s a lot of glory and gladness. You know the story. Peter, James, and John ascend a mountain with Jesus, and Jesus is transfigured while they are praying. The appearance of Jesus’ face is changed, and his clothes becoming dazzling white. Peter, James, and John see Jesus talking with Moses and Elijah. They also hear the voice of God saying: “This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!” Like I said, there’s lots of glory and gladness.

But where’s the suffering and sadness? Well, we normally don’t hear about suffering and sadness because we traditionally don’t read the biblical passage that immediately precedes the Transfiguration narrative.

Let’s take a look at that preceding passage. Just before Jesus goes up the mountain, he tells his disciples some deeply upsetting things. It’s basically a spoiler alert moment. This is when Jesus reveals his upcoming passion and crucifixion to them. He says: “The Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, chief priests, and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised.”

Jesus also tells the disciples that they, too, will need to bear their own crosses if they are to follow him. He says: “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me.

So, yes, there’s a lot of suffering and sadness.

And so this explains why Jesus reveals his divine nature to Peter, James, and John immediately afterwards on Mount Tabor. The glory and gladness of the Transfiguration was given to them so that they would have something beautiful to hold onto when things started to get really hard during the journey to the cross.

Indeed, we hear in today’s epistle reading from the Second Letter of Peter that the experience of the Transfiguration profoundly impacted St. Peter. It stayed with him even as he was approaching his death. Looking back, Peter proclaims that “we had been eyewitnesses to his majesty.”

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Let's face it. All of us have experienced a lot of suffering and sadness during the past two and a half years. Whether it's the COVID-19 pandemic, the war on the Ukraine, gun violence and domestic terrorism, political and economic instability, or the polarization of religious discourse, things have been really hard for everyone.

And don't even get me started with the Lambeth Conference, which is the once-in-a-decade meeting of all the bishops in the Anglican Communion. Lambeth is going on as we speak, and it's been a roller coaster ride with respect to the status of LGBTQ persons in the Anglican Communion. You can check out my Twitter feed – which has been pretty active during the past two weeks – if you would like to read more about this.

Social media and ecclesiastical politics aside, however, this is precisely why the Transfiguration is still such an important event for us today. Like Peter, James, and John, we are called to remember the glory and gladness of the Transfiguration to help us get through the suffering and sadness of our everyday lives.

Now some of you might not be feeling much suffering and sadness right now. And that's great. But that doesn't mean that someone right next to you isn't feeling that way. Or that you might experience suffering and sadness sometime in the near future.

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I'd like to leave you on this Feast of the Transfiguration with a closing thought from another former rector of our parish – but this time from the 20th century.

A few decades ago, Fr. Norman Catir, our fifth rector, wrote that we're not just called to *witness* the transfigured Christ as Peter, James, and John did. Rather, we're also called to *be* examples of the transfigured Christ to others.

Fr. Catir wrote that, as members of a parish named for the Transfiguration, each of us is uniquely called to “manifest the glory of the transfigured Christ amidst the intimacy and simplicity of daily charity, grounded in the lively hope of our Lord's cross and resurrection.”

In this time of great suffering and sadness, I invite you to reflect on how you might manifest the glory and gladness of Jesus Christ to all whom you encounter. How might you reflect the dazzling appearance of Jesus wherever you might be?

It doesn't have to be anything big. It could be a simple smile or a “how are you doing?” to someone who is hurting. It could be a small donation to your favorite charity. Or it could be listening to someone who needs a sympathetic ear.

At the beginning of today's mass, we asked God through the Collect of the Day that we be “delivered from the disquietude of this world” through the “beauty” of the “wonderfully transfigured” Jesus Christ.

(By the way, some of you might not be familiar with the word “disquietude.” It basically means feeling anxious or unsettled. It’s the opposite of feeling quiet or calm. So we were asking God to deliver us from feeling anxious or unsettled.)

So on this Feast of Title for our parish, let us pray that we might be delivered from our disquietude. But let us also pray that, through the grace of God, we might help to deliver others from their disquietude.

“Glory and Gladness shall follow suffering and sadness.”