

Transfiguration Sermon

Opening Prayer

May you hear the Spirit in your heart as you listen to human words.

Sermon

Yesterday was the anniversary of the death of my Uncle Clyde. He was Fr. Clyde Werts, a Jesuit priest, and professor of engineering at Loyola University in Los Angeles. He was a frequent visitor when I was growing up. He loved to play with us kids. In summers, we would spend two weeks in Newport Beach and swim in Balboa Bay. He visited us there. As a little guy, I played in the bay where I could touch bottom or I wore a life jacket. It was fun to have Uncle Clyde playing in the water with us.

Then one day Uncle Clyde took on a new role. When I was about 6 or 7, he and I were in the bay, and he told me that he was going to teach me how to swim. I had no life jacket on and Uncle Clyde pulled me holding my hands out over my head. He held my hands while he had me kick. After a time of that he let go of my hands and took what was probably a very small step back from me. I thrashed with my arms and legs and screamed bloody murder. He probably did not leave me in that state for more than two or three seconds, and grabbed my hands again. We repeated this comedy many times. Finally, the thrashing became more efficient and the screams once heard round the world subsided. He then started taking two and three and four steps away from me, and I could swim to him. There came the time when he was not physically present, but he was present to me in the gift of swimming. I no longer needed a life jacket or to be able to touch bottom.

The Transfiguration is an event in which Jesus tells his disciples, and through Luke tells us, that it is time to discard our life jackets and venture beyond where we can touch bottom. It is time to learn to swim.

Up to now in Luke's Gospel and in our Epiphany readings, Jesus has been gradually revealing who he is. He receives a heavenly endorsement as he humbly receives John's baptism. He teaches, forgives sins, heals, conquers and saves others from evil. He calls disciples to follow him. He confronts false and hypocritical practice of God's law. He is truly wonderful to be with. He is comfortable and reassuring. And He seems to be meeting his disciples' expectations of the Messiah. But his disciples, and often we, don't really get it.

So one day Jesus takes Peter, James, and John up the mountain. Through Luke, Jesus takes us also. Jesus starts praying and his face changes and his clothes become dazzling white. These symbols would mean a lot to the disciples and to Luke's original readers. When Moses confronted God Moses' face shone.

Jesus, the more than wonderful human, is now powerfully revealing his divinity. This is necessary because of what is to follow.

I want to drive home to you the power of this revelation of divinity with 21st century symbols. A blog I read presented two videos. One starts on earth and moves away from the earth. When the sun comes into view the earth is a speck, and then no longer visible. Then the sun is a star among many stars. Then the sun disappears as the Milky Way, our galaxy, is shown. Then the Milky Way appears as just one small galaxy amid many galaxies. Finally, a scene from 100 million light years out shows a web of light that presents many clusters of galaxies. Our universe is stunningly vast, and how much more vast is its Creator.

The second video starts at the view from 100 million light years away and reverses the journey, back through the galaxies, past the stars in our galaxy, past the sun, and back to earth. Once on earth, a swampland appears, and soon we see one plant, and then one leaf. Then our view penetrates the leaf until we can see its subatomic particles. God is the craftsperson of our vast universe and the craftsperson of the subatomic particles that make it up.

This is the divinity that Jesus reveals, the magnificent God far beyond our comprehension, and at the same time the divine being who has chosen to be one of us.

Jesus is with Moses who represents the Old Testament Law and Elijah who represents the prophets. Moses and Elijah represent the world that the disciples know and are comfortable with. Then a cloud covers this scene, and a voice speaks. "This is my son, my chosen. Listen to him." Listen to him. He is the divine word of God. Listen to him.

Note that Moses and Elijah are now gone from the scene. There is only Jesus. Listen to him.

Why is this point so important now? Before Jesus went up the mountain, he said he was going to suffer, die, and rise. He called on his followers to take up their crosses. When he was with Moses and Elijah, they discussed what he was going to accomplish in Jerusalem. After he came down from the mountain, he said he was going to be betrayed into human hands, and he wanted the disciples to let the words sink into their ears. And Luke tells us that they did not understand and that they did not want to ask him. How often do we not listen, not understand, and not want to ask?

After the Transfiguration Jesus starts his journey to Jerusalem where he will suffer, die, and rise. Because it was hard for the disciples, and it is hard for us, to make sense of this, at this point we need to know the glory, the magnificence, the overwhelming mystery of divinity. It strikes me that when Jesus' disciples

responded negatively to predictions of suffering and death, the part they really did not hear was the glory of Resurrection.

This week we start Lent. The human Jesus has taught and shown us much. And in his Transfiguration he has given us a glimpse of his divinity. He asks us to join him in his journey to Jerusalem, in his journey to suffering and death and to glorious Resurrection.

We tend to think of Lent as a time when we give up something. Jesus is asking us to give up our life jackets and the safety of being able to touch bottom. He is asking us to plunge with Him into the waters of faith, hope, trust, and love. He is asking us to understand that God did not create this world the way we want. He is asking us to entrust our lives of sufferings, and deaths, and resurrections to Him.

I pray that as our Lenten prayer progresses, we are more and more able to travel our path with the human Jesus who chose to be one of us, and with the divine Jesus who promises us a share in his magnificence and glory.

As many of you know, I am terminally ill. Jesus is asking me to walk with Him through suffering and death, and join Him in the joy and glory and magnificence of His Resurrection. I want to testify to you that along my path there is also great joy here and now. The Risen Jesus walks with me. In addition, many of Jesus' beloved walk with me, my beautiful wife, my family, friends, neighbors, and all of you.

This is the story of your Lent. This is the story of your lives, from birth through both joy and suffering to death and Resurrection.

Amen.