

Second Sunday of Lent – Year C
(Mar. 7, 2004)

A few years ago there was a film around called “It’s My Life.” You may have seen it. It’s about a couple who learn that the wife is pregnant and at the same time find out that the husband has terminal cancer. In one scene the husband decides to face his fear of roller-coasters by taking a ride. He sits in the lead car in the front seat, next to a twelve-year old boy. The man’s knuckles turn white from grabbing onto the bar in front of him even before the car begins to move. The boy sitting next to him turns to him and asks, “First time, huh?” When the car almost reaches the peak of the first climb, the boy says, “It’s more fun if you let go.” The car careens downward, the boy joyously reaches upward, but the man holds on even tighter. At the end of the ride the boy jumps out, turns to his seatmate and says, “You can let go now.”

Later on in the film, as the man is dying, the screen flashes brilliant, blinding white. The husband is seated again in a roller-coaster car at the peak of the ride. He joyously lets go and throws his arms upward. It’s a moment of liberation, a moment of transformation, even of transfiguration, and it comes in death.

Many of us can, I suspect, appreciate the metaphor of life as a roller-coaster ride. How often though have we managed as yet to let go and throw our arms joyously upward?

Today’s readings speak of some profound moments of transformation. Yet at the most crucial moment of transformation, most of the people involved seem to be completely passive. Abraham is in a trance; Peter, James, and John are in a deep sleep; the “citizens of heaven” of whom Paul speaks are waiting to be remade by Jesus. I suspect that very few people today realize that the most profound transformation of all is not in our hands. The Gospel story contains moments that are awesome, perhaps even terrifying, but its focus is more on the joy of fulfilled relationship, the joy of letting go. Face to face with God, Jesus is filled with light. The experience of Jesus and his relationship with the Father is, of course, unique. Yet the same ingredients can be found in our own transfigurations. Whenever we feel wholly loved, we experience feelings of

joy and light and goodness.

The trouble is such moments are not in our own hands. Though we are born to love, we remain – from birth to death – utterly dependent on the grace of another’s love – especially on the grace of the other’s love. The love of God. If that grace is withheld from us, we fall apart; if given to us, we are transformed. In the case of the love and grace of God, we know that it is always given to us. Transformation, then, transfiguration depends on how we receive that grace.

Pope St. Leo the Great, writing about this mystery back in the sixth century, said this:

“The great reason for this transfiguration was to remove the scandal of the cross from the hearts of his disciples and to prevent the humiliation of his voluntary suffering from disturbing the faith of those who had witnessed the surpassing glory that lay concealed. With no less forethought Jesus was also providing a firm foundation for the hope of the church. The whole body of Christ – including us, of course – was to understand the kind of transformation that it would receive as his gift. The members of that body were to look forward to a share in that glory which first blazed out in Christ their head.”

Pope St. Leo tells us we are to share in the transfiguration of Christ.

Mountains in the Bible are symbolic places. They are places where people meet God, where they hear the voice of God speaking to them: Moses on Mt. Sinai, Elijah on Mt. Horeb. Together these two who appear with Jesus represent the Law and the Prophets, everything that the Jewish people hold dear, the Law and the Prophets that Jesus fulfills in his life, death, and resurrection. On the mountain top, Peter, James, and John also hear God speaking. Peter, we hear, becomes ecstatic, delirious. Luke tells us he doesn’t know what he is saying. Let’s stay here. Let’s prolong this experience. It’s too good to let go. But when he finally comes to his senses, he hears God say, “This is my Son, my chosen one. Listen to him.” Listen to him. Then he looks up and sees only Jesus. They can’t stay on the mountain. They have had their grace-filled moment; their time to gain strength for the task ahead, and so they must go down and face the work that remains to be done. There are people to be fed. There are hurts to be healed. There is a journey to be completed.

Dear friends, we come here every Sunday to hear the word of God and to be fed with the bread of life. We come to experience the bonds that make us the one Body of Christ, and the transforming power of the Eucharist. This is our mountain top. But like Peter, James, and John, we can't stay here. There is work to be done. We take with us what we have felt and experienced and learned back to our families, our friends, the places where we live and work, the market-place, the office, the class-room, the hospital, the factory, wherever, and we share the transforming love of God with all those we meet, especially those who have not already felt at least a little of that love in their lives. It's our way of letting go, of throwing our arms up in the air in the joy and happiness that real service can bring, not just to others but to ourselves as well.

Lent reminds us each year that our lives, too, are journeys, ultimately through death to new life when, as St. Paul tells us in the second reading, "the Lord Jesus Christ will give a new form to this lowly body of our and remake it according to the pattern of his glorified body," much as we heard Pope St. Leo say a little while ago. Lenten also challenges us to deep experiences of prayer. And here let me insert a commercial for our parish retreat the weekend of April 2-4. That, too, can be a transforming experience, giving us a sense of God's presence that equips us for the daily mundane and often tedious journeys of our lives. This is our Christian calling, our vocation to follow the Lord Jesus. This is what inevitably must happen if only we do as God told the Apostles, "Listen to him."