

David Hollenbach, S.J.

Second Sunday of Lent (A), Feb. 17, 2008

Gn 12:1-4; Ps 33:4-5, 18-20, 22; 2 Tm 1:8-10; Mt 17:1-9—Darkness into Light

Today's Gospel reading is the story of the transfiguration of Jesus. The word "transfiguration" means a change of form or transformation. On a mountain in Galilee the disciples see Jesus transformed. The scene described is dramatic. Jesus face dazzles like the sun; his clothes become radiant. He seems to have been taken into another realm, a realm of light and brilliance.

What is happening here? On one level, the transformation of Jesus anticipates his risen glory at Easter and beyond. Thus it holds out hope that we too can be transformed and enter into eternal life along with the risen Jesus. Today's gospel calls to mind a passage from Paul's second letter to the Corinthians: "All of us gazing with unveiled face on the glory of the Lord are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory." The manifestation of Jesus' glory promises the glory and light of eternal life to us his followers.

But how does this promise fit into our Lenten season and with our experience of the brokenness and struggles of life? If your experience is at all like mine, moments when I feel like I am living in a realm of light are not very frequent. In daily life, my face and the faces of my co-workers, family and friends are rarely radiant like the sun. Our daily experience is often pretty tedious. Not much transfiguration there. Even more challenging are the times when we encounter real

suffering—the serious illness of a loved one, the breakdown of a love that meant very much to us. Our society is also touched by much suffering, from the random shooting of students in class in Northern Illinois, to the death and displacement from home of millions of Iraqis by war, to the political manipulation that has turned Kenya into a zone of ethnic conflict. What can the transfiguration of Jesus mean in the midst of these struggles? The mountain top where it happened seems quite distant from much of our experience.

But notice the context of the Transfiguration in Matthew's gospel. It is surrounded by two predictions of Jesus's passion—one right before and one right after today's gospel. It occurs at the beginning of Jesus' journey to Jerusalem, which he has just predicted will end in death by crucifixion. When Jesus talks about his coming death, Peter strongly objects: "God forbid, Lord! No such thing shall ever happen to you." Jesus response to Peter is was equally forceful: "Get behind me, Satan! You are thinking not as God does, but like humans."

Thus the Transfiguration occurs not when everyone hears Jesus's words, lives by them, and thus brings God's reign to fulfillment. No. The radiance of Transfiguration comes upon Jesus when people are turning away from him, when disciples like Peter misunderstand him, and when the religious and secular authorities of his time are conspiring together about how to put him to death. The

transformation of Jesus does not wrap him in Light and Radiance only after he has moved beyond misunderstanding, rejection and suffering.

Right in the midst of his movement to Jerusalem, where death awaits him, Jesus is wrapped in the light of God. The love of God surrounds him and sustains him, even as he moves toward Calvary. Just a few days after he has predicted that he will be executed, God's voice proclaims from the cloud "This is my beloved. Listen to him." I am with you, even as you pass through suffering and death.

The great theologian Karl Rahner summarized the meaning of the Transfiguration this way: "In the dark night of hopelessness the light of God shines, a human heart finds in God the power which turns a dying into victory and into redemption of the world." Jesus transformation into a beacon of God's unconditional love for us occurs not just at the time of his resurrection, but in the routine of his living, as people misunderstand and reject him, and as his death approaches. Here—in the midst of all this—is my beloved. Listen to him.

These words apply to us too. In the midst of our boring routines, and when we face misunderstanding, rejection, suffering, even death, God says to us: you are my beloved—I am with you. This is transformation indeed. Even where we experience loss, God is with us. There is a ray of true light even where darkness seems to have the upper hand. What a source of hope and joy! We celebrate the

transfiguration of darkness, suffering and death into light and life, right in the midst of our struggles. Let us give thanks for that at the table of life.

*David Hollenbach, S.J.*

*St. Ignatius Church*

*February 17, 2008*