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Sunday of the Second Week of Lent (B)

"Rabbi, how good it is for us to be here;" how good it is for us to be here (Mark 9:5). The disciples rejoiced in being in the presence of two of the greatest men of God Israel had ever known, along with their Rabbi, their teacher. As Jesus spoke with Moses the Lawgiver and Elijah the Prophet, Peter, James, and John, beheld a wondrous sight: Jesus was "transfigured before them, and his clothes became dazzling white, such as no fuller on earth could bleach them" (Mark 9:2-3). "How good it is for us to be here," they said; how good it is for us to see the glory of our teacher. And then the voice from the heavens was heard: "This is my Son, my beloved. Listen to him" (Mark 9:7). And Moses and Elijah vanished.

But why were the disciples so overcome with joy at this manifestation of Jesus' glory? Surely they had seen the Lord's glory before. We heard just last week how Jesus began his ministry of preaching repentance and of the coming of the Kingdom. Was not his glory there, also? And what of the numerous healings, the feeding of the multitudes, the raising of the dead? All of these signs and wonders of Jesus occurred before his transfiguration. Surely the disciples recognized his glory during these manifestations of his power; but never before

had they said, "Rabbi, how good it is for us to be here." Why did they say it this time?

Six days ago, Jesus "began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer greatly and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and rise after three days" (Mark 8:31). He then said to them, "Whoever wishes to come after me must deny himself, take up his cross, and follow me" (Mark 8:34). Just days before his glory was revealed to the disciples, Jesus told them of the sufferings he must go through as well as the sufferings they must go through if they wished to continue following him. Is it any wonder, then, that Peter exclaimed, "how good it is for us to be here!"?

The disciples somehow understood Jesus' words about his suffering and impending death. They knew the scribes and the Pharisees and the Roman officials were moving against him; they knew they plotted against him. The disciples knew as well, that they were themselves also under scrutiny. It was beginning to be quite dangerous to follow Jesus. And today, six days later, they beheld his glory.

Perhaps they thought Jesus changed his mind about his necessary suffering. Perhaps they thought that now that Jesus had shown to them his glory that Jesus would summon his armies and defeat the Romans. They certainly thought they would continue seeing his glory and that their suffering would be

taken away. But this is not what Jesus did at all. Rather, he commanded them "not to tell anyone what they had seen before the Son of Man had risen from the dead" (Mark 9:9). In these few words, Jesus reaffirms the necessity of his own suffering and death in order to enter into his glory. And if the Christ, the Anointed One of God, should have to suffer to enter his glory, why should it be any different for his disciples? And why should it be any different for us today? Jesus makes it very clear: if we wish to share in the glory of his Resurrection, we must also be willing to share in his sufferings, even to the point of death.

In the first reading today from Genesis we hear of the sacrifice of Isaac by Abraham. Isaac, the child of Abraham and Sarah in their old age; Isaac, the only hope for Abraham and Sarah for the fulfillment of God's promise to them that their descendants would be numerous. God asked, and Abraham was ready to give. Abraham would give all he had to the Lord in faith, even his only son and the only hope of his future. He spared nothing.

Because of Abraham's great faith and trust in the Lord, God said to him, after staying his hand, "because you acted as you did in not withholding from me your beloved son, I will bless you abundantly and make your descendants as countless as the stars of the sky and the sands of the seashore" (Genesis 22:16-

17). When Abraham looked up into the sky later that night, he saw a glimmer of each one of us in those stars that represented us, his descendants in faith. The Lord went on to promise Abraham, "your descendants shall take possession of the gates of their enemies, and in your descendants all the nations of the earth shall find blessing - all this because you obeyed my command" (Genesis 22:17-18). All this because you obeyed my command.

Abraham certainly did not want to sacrifice his only son to the Lord. But the Lord asked and Abraham trusted in the Lord and was willing to give to him all that he had. And for his trust, Abraham was greatly blessed, more so than ever before. And so it was with Christ.

We know how on the Mount of Olives in the Garden of Gethsemane Jesus prayed, "Take this cup away from me, but not what I will but what you will" (Mark 14:36). Jesus trusted in the Father and was willing to give him all that he asked, even his very life. And because of this willingness, as we hear in the Epistle to the Hebrews, Jesus was made "perfect through suffering" (Hebrews 2:10).

The experience of the transfiguration on the mountain was for the disciples, as it is for us, an experience of the glory of our God and Savior. It is an experience of hope; it is a promise of what awaits us through our suffering. The

resurrection is not possible without the Paschal Mystery - the suffering and death of Christ. Resurrection cannot come without death. In the midst of the anguish and fear of the disciples, Jesus offers to them a sign of his glory to remind them that suffering and death is not the end. Suffering and death was not the end for Jesus; it was not the end for the disciples; and it is not the end for us.

In our society and culture, suffering is looked upon as something undesirable; it is something to be avoided at all costs and in any way possible. Suffering is seen as something for the weak, either physically, spiritually, emotionally, or psychologically. In short, suffering is not something a "normal" person goes through. We spend great amounts of money and spend large amounts of time listening to so-called experts on ways to avoid suffering. Some even go so far as to say that suffering does not come to a good Christian. There are those who say that if we truly love God and serve him with all that we can and follow all of his ways that we will not suffer at all. All of these people are simply wrong; they are not bad, they are just wrong. This is not the message of Jesus.

Jesus says to us today through his transfiguration on the mountain that both glory and suffering are part of the Christian life. Both are to be accepted and lived and experienced.

Neither can be avoided. Glory comes precisely through suffering, not through the avoidance of suffering.

This second Sunday of Lent reminds us that Lent is not just about the doom and gloom of our penitential practices. Rather, it reminds us that our penitential practices help us to discover what needs to be rooted out of our lives so that we might more closely share in the glory of the Lord. Our increased prayer, our fasting, our alms-giving, and whatever else we do this Lent, lead us through our suffering to the great joy and glory of the waters of baptism and the Risen Lord. The transfiguration is a visible and clear reminder of the resurrection that awaits us if we suffer with the Lord. We have, or soon will, suffered and died with him in baptism, and we continue to do so each day of Lent, trusting in the promise of the glory of the resurrection. "Rabbi, how good it is for us to be here."