

## Transfiguration

Homily at St. John of God Church, San Francisco

March 20, 2011

by

Deacon Brian Bromberger

This past week held grim news coming out of Libya and especially Japan coping with the horrible after effects of a 9.0 earthquake which generated a devastating tsunami and a potential nuclear catastrophe a week ago Friday. But amidst the terrible loss of lives and homes, one inspiring story emerged. Hiromatsu Shinkawa was pushed out to sea while he clung for dear life to the roof of his home, after the tsunami swept away the rest of his house and his wife. The tsunami was later described as looking like thousands of horses running towards him on a computer video game simulation. For two days, he drifted off the coast trying to no avail to get the attention of helicopters and ships that passed by. Finally last Sunday, a Japanese military vessel spotted the 60 year old waving a red cloth, having drifted 10 miles offshore from the now destroyed city of Minamisoma. Rescue troops used a small boat to pluck him from the ocean. Military officials said Hiromatsu was lucky that mild weather, relatively calm seas, and **no** shark attacks enabled him to stay afloat for nearly 2 days. "I thought today might be the last day of my life, but I knew I still had to try to hold on" he said.

Today, our Gospel speaks also of a strange dreamlike terrifying scene from Jesus's life. In the Harry Potter books, the students at the Hogwart School of Wizardry are required to take a course in 'Transfiguration,' where they learn how to change teacup into rats or flowers into candles. But our gospel Transfiguration, almost resembles a religious Chlorox bleach TV commercial advertising the whitest clothes beyond imagination lasting for all eternity. We know the disciples were both astonished and frightened by the gleaming light emanating from Jesus. Like Hiromatsu clinging to his roof, Peter wants to hold onto and prolong this ecstatic moment, by building tents to make it permanent, and no doubt stay on the mountain rather than face the cross Jesus had mentioned 6 days earlier after he had confessed Jesus was the Messiah at Caesarea Philippi. For Peter, the transfiguration becomes a first century photo op, that he attempts to force into a structure so it can be kept, controlled and used whenever he wants. Yet that is not the purpose of this luminous event. Remember, Jesus is now slowly making his way to Jerusalem where he will face suffering and death and the disciples will face disillusionment and grief. So the transfiguration is the glory of God shining through the flesh of Jesus, that will find its fulfillment in the resurrection. It is meant to encourage the disciples, to give them fortitude and inspiration for the hard days ahead. This mountain top experience is meant to convince them that God is real, is present, and cares for them, amid all the distress, chaos, and violence to come. It is hearing the **voice** of God that causes fear in the disciples, yet that voice redirects their attention back to Jesus: "This is my beloved one, in whom I take delight..**listen** to him," because listening is a necessary prelude to following and doing. Then the ecstatic episode ends; suddenly there is just Jesus himself **alone** coming forward into their regular lives again, because **he** is all the disciples need. He touches them, always a sign of healing in Matthew, and says to them stand up, which in Greek can also be translated as be resurrected, and gently tells them not to be afraid, informing the disciples that before they can experience the Son of God in all his dazzling glory, they must first experience the Son of Man who will be persecuted and crucified. Suffering will yield to triumph in the resurrection, but the triumph cannot be endured without the cross. These are the words of resurrection: to arise and live **without** fear of hate, injustice, suffering, and death. This vision of the transfiguration will help them withstand the crosses in their own lives. Still it is not the

**experience**, however wondrous, they are to hold onto, but it is Jesus to whom they should cling, for it is Jesus who is in control, not them, and not us.

Our Eastern Christian brothers and sisters, based on the Greek word used to describe this metamorphosis, have interpreted the Transfiguration not just as a change in the person of Jesus **or** as a spiritual experience of God, Jesus is sharing with his friends, but **rather** as a change in the awareness or consciousness of the disciples. The light of the Transfiguration, revealed **in** Jesus, God's divine glory, so **we** could recognize it in human form. The light they saw pouring out of Jesus had always been there; they just had not seen it previously. What changes at the transfiguration is not the Light, but **their** ability to apprehend it. The divine light remains present to the same degree everywhere, whether or not it is perceived by us. Through our baptism, all of us acquire and share in this divine light, but it is hidden by our human condition and obscured by our sinfulness and willfulness, as we sometimes blind ourselves, to seeing the truth. Like the disciples we are being transformed from frightened people trying to regain self control into people of faith who don't need to be in control, recognizing God is guiding us. So Matthew is implying we are not to build tents to house Jesus on some mountain top, but rather we are to **become** tents that house Jesus in our lives. We are to follow Jesus until we become people through whom others can see **him**. Just as Jesus was light for his friends Peter, James, and John, **he** will be light for us. We are to become **Jesus's** icons, transfigured into **living** stained glass windows so that the divine light, God's glory, already present within us, can shine more luminously through us into our surrounding world, desperate for illumination.

What is preventing the divine light from beaming in each of us as often and as brilliantly as possible? This is the great challenge posed for us during Lent, known traditionally as the period of enlightenment. The transfiguration is our own spiritual transformation into the image, likeness, and lightness of Jesus continuing throughout our lives. The resurrected Jesus is with us as we journey through Lent, especially during its hard uphill climbs, its moments of dryness and panic, our acknowledgment of sin and our need for forgiveness when we see ourselves as we truly **are** before God, as we become increasingly aware of our inadequacies, limitations, and failures, as we fall on our faces and sometimes backslide into old destructive habits and not live up to the promises of our baptisms. As we confront our own darkness in Lent, the divine light teaches us to concentrate less on our own shortcomings and disappointments, as real as they are, and focus more on looking towards God's merciful, healing love. Through the divine light, we see not what we have failed to be, but what through God's grace, we can yet become. We can follow the example of Vanetta Flowers. Vanetta's dream inspired by her divine inner light, was to compete in the Olympic Games from the time she was a little girl, a goal for which she prayed to God and believed in her heart God would answer. She was a very fast runner and by age 22 was a world class athlete ready to try out for the Olympics. She competed in the 100 meter dash and long jump, but she lost making the track team by a fraction of a second. Instead of giving up, she put in **four** more years of grueling training: getting up early, lifting weights, running every day, and eating healthily. In 2000 her big moment arrived and at age 26 she was in the **best** physical shape of her life. She tried out for the long jump, knowing it would be her **last** chance to make the Olympic track team, but in spite of her training and talent, she again did not make the cut. She was devastated as it looked like 17 years of training had gone down the drain. Every voice in her head told her it was over: you must have heard God wrong---her dream was definitely not going to happen now. A few days later her husband saw a sign in a gym that said, "Continue your Olympic dream by trying out for the bobsled team." There were two requirements: you had to be a good sprinter and an excellent long jumper, the **very** two things Vanetta had worked on for 17 years. She didn't even **know** what the bobsled was, but her husband talked her into trying out. She not only made the Olympic team but in 2002 she became the first African American woman to ever **win** a gold medal in the Winter Olympics! Our God is a faithful God who **can** be trusted. What God promises will come to pass! God will never fail us or let us down! Faith is trusting our inner divine light, believing that God has our best interests at heart. So **all** our Lenten practices

and disciplines, whether they be giving up something which may block out God's light or doing something positive which permits more light to enter in, allow us to be transfigured gradually into the image of Christ, proclaimed by us in the Nicene Creed each week as Light from Light.

But how much light **do** we **allow** in? Well, if you are like me, not **much** and in very **small** contained, controlled doses. Sometimes it feels, as if our light is a faint ember, barely able to ignite a pilot light. But notice Jesus took **3** disciples up that mountain and while our individual lights may be tiny indeed, we can take my ember, your flame, and someone else's spark and collectively build an assembly of light, creating a roaring blaze that becomes our offering of faith symbolized in the bonfire, lighting the Paschal Candle at the start of the Easter Vigil. As a faith community, we are light for each other, especially during those times when our own light seems dim or we're stuck in a temporary spiritual outage or blackout. There is a climber's register on a difficult peak in Washington's North Cascade mountains. On that register is a sign which reads, "**Yes** you can. Others **have**." In spite of all the grim news in our world last week and perhaps in our individual lives, the light of Jesus can help us overcome all kinds of challenges. We can climb the mountains in front of us with God's help, as others like Hiromatsu Shinkawa and Vanetta Flowers have done. If we are going to enter both our own and others' valleys and trials of illness, sorrow, despair, and oppression, we need to **listen** to Jesus, to hear what he has to say to us and hold onto his promises more firmly than a frightened rollercoaster rider grips the safety bar, as well as follow the advice NASA Space Shuttle astronaut Bill Whittle once gave, "Courage is not the absence of fear. It is taking action in the face of fear." God has promised to be **with** us, to be the light in the midst of any dark terrifying experiences that we might encounter and even lead us through the valley of the shadow of death. The real transfiguration happens not on the **top** of a mountain, but **down** in the valleys, ministering in the messy, painful, disheartening places of the world. We are called to rise, be resurrected, and not be afraid, to act for others as lamps lit by the electrifying power of God, so as to brighten our broken, wounded world. So **this** Lent how much of God's light are **you** willing to let in?