

**Feast of the Transfiguration of the Lord – Cycle A**  
**Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception – August 6, 2017**  
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Occasionally, I will run into someone I went to grade school or high school with. “You haven’t changed a bit,” we tell each other; “you look exactly the same,” each of us says – which is, of course, true in the you still have two eyes and two ears and two arms and two legs kind of way. But *exactly* the same, well, maybe not. After all, the years have changed us. I have grown a little taller since first grade, and a little wider since twelfth. My face is, how do I put this, a little fuller than it once was, and my hairline – well, let’s just say that a full head of hair is no longer as fashionable as it once was. Yes, the years change us. Life changes us. Sun exposure and diet and age and genetics and all of that combine to alter our appearance. And beyond the physical, the experiences of life have given us wisdom, and brought us sadness and joy. Life has encouraged us and defeated us, given us cause to worry and reason to hope. We are, in many ways, grateful for the lessons life has taught us – difficult as some of them have been. But as a result of those experiences, we will never be the same.

In today’s gospel, Jesus took his three closest disciples – Peter, James and John – with him up on a high mountain. There, Matthew says, “he was transfigured before them; his face shone like the sun and his clothes became white as light.” They went up there with a teacher, a friend, someone they travelled with, lived with every day – someone as familiar to them as a member of their own family. Then, suddenly, before their eyes he was changed, transformed, transfigured. He went from ordinary to extraordinary, from someone who belonged in this world to someone who seemed to move beyond this world. Jesus went from one who was speaking with them to one who was conversing with Moses and Elijah, with two of the pivotal figures in salvation history, with the Law and the Prophets. Peter instinctively knew that he wanted to remain there – wanted this transfigured Jesus to remain there with Moses and Elijah. Let me make three tents for you, he said. Dwell with us, let this moment never end. And then the Father’s voice is heard: “This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased,” – the same words heard at the river Jordan some years earlier when Jesus was baptized. But on that mountain the Father added, “Listen to him.” Peter, James and John fell prostrate. Before their eyes, Jesus had changed in appearance, they saw Moses and Elijah, and they heard the voice of God. And as suddenly as it began, this experience ended. Jesus came and touched them and told them not to be afraid. He looked as he did before.

The Church celebrates the Feast of the Transfiguration of the Lord each August, though many of us only participate in the celebration when August 6<sup>th</sup> falls on Sunday. Yet each year – on the Second Sunday of Lent – we hear one of the three gospel accounts of the transfiguration. We are reminded each Lent that Jesus allowed his three closest Apostles to marvel at his true glory. Jesus knew that they could not face the

trials ahead, that they could not endure Good Friday, unless they had at least a glimpse of Easter Sunday. And we can understand that. In any difficult journey of our lives, in those moments of trial and hardship, it is the hope of what is to come that keeps us going. We persevere because we believe that the future can be better – maybe the far distant future, maybe our children’s future and not our own, but the future nonetheless. And so before the agony in the garden and the trial before the Sanhedrin, before the scourging at the pillar and the condemnation by Pilate, before the road to Golgotha and a criminal’s death, Jesus gave these privileged disciples a glimpse of what is to come. In the words of some of the Church Fathers, this was Christ’s second Epiphany – a manifestation of his divinity. Because this feast is celebrated forty days before the Feast of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross, because we hear this passage each Lent, we tend to view the Transfiguration in terms of heaven and earth, in terms of light and darkness, in terms of Lent and Easter, in terms of life, death, and resurrection. And that is certainly appropriate, but the tradition of the Eastern Church gives us another perspective, an additional perspective.

To appreciate this view of the Eastern Church, we have to go back to the beginning – to Genesis, to Adam and Eve and their encounter with Satan. Our first parents were seduced by the serpent; they fell for his lies. Of course, we see Satan again when he tempted Jesus at his most vulnerable – after forty days of fasting in the desert. He did his best to lure Jesus over to his side – but the eternal Son of God was too strong. Adam had fallen, Christ did not. Christ, as St. Paul tells us, is the new Adam, is the one who came to restore humanity to righteousness. The Eastern Church sees the transfiguration in this same light. On Mount Tabor, that tradition tells us, Jesus was not giving his disciples a glimpse of what is to come. Rather, he was giving them a glimpse of what might have been; Jesus was not giving them a view of Easter, but of Eden. The transfigured Jesus who appeared with Moses and Elijah was meant to show Peter, James and John what humanity could have been without the sin of Adam. From this perspective, the extraordinary miracle of the Transfiguration is that we are able to see salvation as a restoration of our innate dignity – humanity created not only in the image, but also in the likeness of God. That’s what we look for when we encounter someone from our past, is it not? We are looking for that spark of youth, for that likeness to what each of us used to be before the years, before life – and the wrinkles and the cholesterol – altered our appearance. In the transfiguration, Jesus shows us humanity without sin, without evil’s destructive force. He makes manifest the original human design, the one who walked with God in the garden, the one who was naked without shame. That is what we celebrate today. Yes, God offers us a brighter future in the Paschal Mystery. He is the light shining in the darkness, the morning star, as St. Peter tells us in the second reading. He offers us eternal life through his saving death and resurrection. But more than that, he offers us our past – not the one we lived, but the one we were meant for. On Mount Tabor that day, the apostles got a glimpse of heaven – but they saw Eden as well.