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When I was about 7 or 8 years old and my older brother's voice was changing he did something nice for me. (It's easy to remember because such an occurrence was so rare.) I was afraid that there was something under my bed, so he got down on the floor and controlling his transitioning vocal cords shouted one resounding baritone "Boo!" Then, he told me that whatever it was, it had run away and would never come back because it was so frightened — an emotion I knew too well myself. Because I had somebody bigger and scarier around, I never again had to fear anything under the bed.

Today's reading from the Book of Daniel is apocalyptic literature, a type of writing designed for people under great stress. It assures them that no matter how powerful the forces of evil seem, no matter how much suffering enemies inflict, God will win in the end, so there's nothing to worry about. Apocalyptic literature paints an image that depicts God as better and bigger and stronger than anything the people fear. So, in today's reading we get a version of the stereotyped image of God as a white-haired potentate surrounded by symbols of sovereignty. The most comforting thing about this scene is not that the "Ancient One" is so pure and prevailing, but that he gives his power to "one like a Son of man," someone more like human beings, less overwhelming than the Ancient One yet still worthy to receive an unassailable

dominion. Humanity can rest in peace.

Today's Gospel contrasts with the reading from Daniel in a thought-provoking way. In Daniel we get a mind-boggling description of the God figure as white-haired, dazzlingly-dressed, enthroned and surrounded by fire with thousands eager to serve him. About the one like a Son of man we only hear that he came on the clouds.

The Gospel reading takes it for granted that we understand that the entire event centers on Jesus. The disciples already know him as somebody whose fingernails get just as dirty as theirs. Then suddenly they see him in a brilliantly different light. There on the mountain, they get a glimpse of the very core of his being. For a flashing moment they comprehend something about who he is in the light of everything they believe. They see the Jesus they have known even as his face shines with the truth of his relationship with the God he knows as his Abba. Unlike in Daniel's vision, they see no image of God. All they know about God in this scene comes from the voice which called Jesus the beloved, pleasing son to whom they should pay attention.

Daniel described an awesome image of God and then tempered the magnificence with someone like a human being. The Gospel simply offers the human Jesus as the visible image of God. That is astounding.

In the face of the transfigured Jesus, the disciples saw not only who Jesus was, but what humanity is created to be. That was perhaps the most overwhelming dimension of the entire experience. It's easy enough to look at a heavenly being and bow down and offer to build tents or temples. It's very freeing to pay worship to a majestic God who takes charge of everything. But that wasn't Jesus' message.

Jesus told Peter, James and John that it was time to go down from the mountain. It was time to return to his ordinary way of revealing who God is. They still needed time to understand not only that he was the image of God, but that they were called to be the same. What they saw and thought of as a glimpse of eternity was really nothing more than a revelation of the deepest meaning of their everyday history.

Over a hundred years ago the Blessed Metropolitan Anthony, a Russian Orthodox prelate, preached about this feast saying that the goal of the Lord's revelation was to persuade his followers that they too are to shine with the beauty of God's love. He said that people longed for the Christ who would reveal fearsome majesty while Jesus offered them simple humanity which has more potential for glory than we can

ever imagine.

Blessed Anthony told his listeners to look around them, to see people who had been transformed. He told them to notice in their faces, their eyes, their tone of voice that which is infinitely attractive. In essence, Anthony tells us “Listen to them! Learn from how they have learned to live as God’s beloved and are empowered to love as we are loved.”

The message of the Transfiguration is not apocalyptic. Jesus doesn’t boo away the demons. Instead, he shows us what every human being can become when open to transforming love.

### **DANIEL 7:9-10, 13-14**

Our selection from Daniel is the climax of Daniel’s dream, the visions in his head. Chapter 7 opens with a description of four fearsome beasts that represent the evil, oppressive empires that had dominated Israel. We come in on Daniel’s dream at the point that heaven begins to execute judgment on that history.

The first thing that happens is that thrones are set up and the Ancient One takes his place on one of them. The title “Ancient One,” literally, the “Ancient of Days,” describes God as beyond time (Psalms 90:2; 93:2; 102:26-28). God’s enthronement is a sign of victory or power. When the ruler is seated on a throne it’s obvious that there is no need to be ready for battle; he presides in unassailable power.

The Ancient One’s white hair is a sign of wisdom, the fact that it is described as “like wool” makes it probable that the human image behind the vision was African. (For a good contrast to Michelangelo’s God figures, look up icons of St. Moses the Black.) His bright clothing serves as a sign of purity; nothing can sully his raiment. It seemed as if half the population of the universe stood at attention in his court. Everything about this description leads to what Scripture calls the fear of God: the recognition of the incomparable immensity of God’s power (Psalm 104:1-4).

After judgment is executed on the beasts who had dominated recent history, Daniel sees “one like a Son of man coming, on the clouds.” Whereas the beasts had come from the earth, this one has a heavenly origin. He is presented before the Ancient One who gives him dominion, glory and kingship, a dominion that is everlasting and shall not be taken away or destroyed.

The first thing that description underlines is that the Son of man is no vain usurper. He humbly allows himself to be taken before the Ancient One who then bestows authority on him. Because his strength comes from God, it is described with six phrases that assure both the power and the permanence of his rule.

With all its symbolic imagery, Daniel's account of his apocalyptic vision does what every apocalypse is meant to do: Daniel assures the people that God is in control. The forces of hell, frightening and bestial as they may be, will not prevail. As he proclaims that message, Daniel also underlines God's awesome immensity and comforting generosity. The one like a Son of man in this reading is really the remnant of Israel, a people God called into existence for the very purpose of sharing divine life. The future that God has planned for them is a gift that no human power is capable of claiming, but one that a humble people can receive freely.

## **2 PETER 1:16-19**

Unlike 1 Peter which some scholars think could have had St. Peter the apostle as an author, the consensus is that nobody knows who wrote this letter in Peter's name. In the early centuries pseudonymous letters were acceptable as interpretations of what the imputed author would have said had he still been around. Presumably, the original receiving communities would have judged whether or not the message was authentic. The positive verdict on this letter is clear from the fact that the church has accepted it for centuries as a bearer of genuine inspiration, no matter who the original author.

It seems that "second Peter" wrote in response to a number of things. On the surface, there was a question of why the delay in Christ's triumphant return. At a deeper level, but ultimately connected to that question, the letter is a response to the atheism of those who have given up on God and belief in God's involvement in human history.

We have an enigma in the fact that the author is writing in Peter's name as if an eyewitness to Jesus' transfiguration even though he was not one of Jesus' disciples. With this, the author is all but saying, "I am speaking as a participant even though I personally wasn't there." This is an indirect way of inviting others to share his faith in the traditions they have received. Just as Jews could say "We crossed the Red Sea with Moses," this author was saying "I was there." By doing that, he challenges his readers to decide if they can do the same or if they are going to disregard their faith

as just one more myth about the gods.

The idea underneath this passage is what Pope Francis emphasizes in his encyclical, *Evangelii Gaudium* (“The Joy of The Gospel”). He insists that Christianity is not an ethical choice or philosophy, but the result of an encounter with Christ. One need not have lived in the first century to have experienced the presence of Christ. One need not have been on the mountain to have received the revelation that Jesus of Nazareth is truly the beloved Son of God who reveals God’s face in a way we can comprehend.

Second Peter underlines this perspective by saying “We possess the prophetic message.” While that can refer to the Scriptures, it also applies to each person’s faith conviction. It reminds them of the experience that has led them to be believers. Prophecy is another word for recognizing God’s action and intention in a particular moment of history. Prophecy entails an encounter with God that can be as simple as listening to our conscience or recognizing our longing for God.

This letter calls us to realize that faith is not a mythical journey but a recognition of God among us. Faith requires that we meditate on our experience and build on those moments when we have felt God’s power and love. Those are our mountaintop experiences. As “second Peter” says, we will do well to be attentive to them, they are lamps that will shine until the moment when the final dawn will break on us.

### **MATTHEW 17:1-9**

The opening prayer for this feast reminds us that the transfiguration of the Lord “confirmed the mysteries of faith ... and wonderfully prefigured our full adoption” through which we will become co-heirs with Christ. That prayer helps us to focus on three dimensions of today’s Gospel.

First, we can see what this event meant for Jesus. Matthew has told us that at the time of his baptism Jesus heard the voice of God claiming him as his Son. Now not just Jesus but his disciples as well hear God’s affirmation of the beloved Son. Jesus’ own awareness of being chosen has become a shared experience: His disciples have witnessed God’s affirmation of him.

Secondly, the disciples saw Jesus more clearly than they ever had before. They saw him for who he truly was as the beloved Son of the Father. His shining face and

clothing expressed the luminosity of his being as the one through whom God's life and love had taken flesh. The vision on the mountain told them that all Jesus had been doing — the controversy, the healings, the teachings, the breaking of bread — everything he did pleased God. It was almost as if they heard again the words of Genesis: "God saw that it was very good" (1:31).

Whatever it was that they had thought of Jesus, whatever their preconceived notions of a teacher or messiah, this adjusted their perception. The revelation they received from God showed that Jesus, just as he was, was everything God wanted for them. Jesus was not getting ready to be their messiah as if there were some revolution to come. He was doing it. He was God's chosen one among them. Jesus the human Son of God was everything God wanted to offer them. That was step two.

The third dimension of the mountaintop revelation was perhaps even more difficult to grasp — what they saw in Jesus was what they were to become: God's beloved. As Paul would say, Jesus was the new Adam. Jesus, transfigured in communion with God, is the image of what humanity was created to be and to experience. Francis describes this saying: "Thanks ... to this encounter ... with God's love ... we are liberated from our narrowness and self-absorption. We become fully human when we become more than human, when we let God bring us beyond ourselves in order to attain the fullest truth of our being" (EG #8).

The Transfiguration is thus a feast of faith in Jesus as the Christ. It celebrates who Jesus is as God's Son and revelation even as it proclaims God's plan for humanity. Celebrating this feast calls us to faith in the Son of God and in what all the rest of Adam's children are called to become.

## **Planning: Transfiguration**

**By:** Lawrence Mick

The celebration of the Eighteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time is displaced this year by the feast of the Transfiguration of the Lord. Every year we hear an account of the Transfiguration on the Second Sunday of Lent. Then, we hear the same account again on this feast, which occasionally falls on Sunday. Note that there are three Gospel passages in the Lectionary under August 6; this year we use the A selection.

Be sure to notify the lectors and musicians well in advance so that they prepare for the proper readings and other texts. The readings are in the Lectionary, under August 6, (#614). The other Mass texts are in the Missal under the same date. Note that the proper preface for the feast is found with the collect prayers rather than with the other prefaces.

Celebrating this event outside of Lent gives it a somewhat different character. The readings focus on the glory of Christ, foreshadowed in Daniel's vision of the "Ancient One" to whom the Son of man is presented, recalled in the text from 2 Peter, and described in the Gospel account from Matthew.

This would suggest a day of great celebration, a kind of echo of Easter. Yet, this feast has significant connections to war that temper our rejoicing. It is an ancient festival, but it entered the universal calendar only in 1457 in gratitude for a victory over the Turks near Belgrade on this date. And, of course, this is also the date of the dropping of the first atomic bomb on Hiroshima in 1945. The contrast between the radiance of the transfigured Christ and the blinding blast of the bomb is hard to ignore.

*Catholic Household Blessings and Prayers* includes a section on Ember Days, starting at page 186 in the first edition and page 168 in the second. The text suggests observing August 6 and 9 (the date Nagasaki was bombed) as days of prayer and fasting in reparation for sins of violence. You might refer to that text and / or print the prayer found there in the bulletin to encourage such an observance. Certainly include a similar petition or two in the General Intercessions today.

Despite rather clear church teaching about the immorality of the use of the atom bomb, many Americans, including Catholics, still think the bombing of Japan was justified, so there will not be universal agreement that we need to repent of that sin. Still, most Catholics can easily accept that the event, whether judged necessary or not, was horrific and a result of the power of evil in our world. It also reminds us what happens when humans seek their own glory rather than the glory of God.

## **Prayers: Transfiguration**

**By:** Joan DeMerchant

### **Introduction**

Throughout history, people have needed new insights, messages and affirmation regarding who God is and the reality of God's presence in their lives. How do we know who or what we can trust, especially in troubling times? Jesus' followers grew in their understanding of who he was — sometimes gradually, sometimes suddenly, as in today's story of the Transfiguration. We are no different. The important thing is to keep growing in our understanding and our commitment.

### **Penitential Act**

- Lord Jesus, you shared your identity with Peter, James and John: Lord, have mercy.
- Christ Jesus, you told them not to be afraid: Christ, have mercy.
- Lord Jesus, you call us to understand you without fear: Lord, have mercy.

### **Prayer of the Faithful**

**Presider** Let us pray for the needs of the world and for our own growth as committed Christians.

**Minister** For the whole church and for all believers: that we may be open to grow in our understanding of who Jesus is and what he asks of us ... we pray,

- For the commitment to serve as peacemakers in a world deeply in need of peace and unity ... we pray,
- For minds that are open to new information and increased understanding about who Jesus is ... we pray,
- For an increase in peacemaking across the world as we seek an end to war ... we pray,
- For those who struggle to believe, or who are locked in rigid views that preclude growing in faith ... we pray,
- For space in our lives that allows us to ponder serious questions ... we pray,
- For parents, teachers, catechists, pastors and all who work to nurture the faith of children and youth ... we pray,
- For those whose faith is impeded by hunger, poverty, abuse, illness, depression or any kind of pain — especially in this community ... we pray,

**Presider** God, who sent Jesus to be with us, we are grateful for all we know about him. Help us to be open to all we have yet to learn, and strengthen our faith as our understanding grows. We ask this in the name of him, whom you call your beloved Son. Amen.

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