

New Heart, New Spirit

A Lenten Scripture Reflection Series

While we typically describe Lent as a penitential season, it helps to realize that the goal of our penitential acts is really a deeper experience of our baptism. The season originated in the first centuries of the Church as a time of final preparation for the catechumens to help them grasp the meaning and power of their imminent baptism. It was expanded in the fourth century to include the already baptized, recognizing the need for an ever-deeper experience of the power of the sacrament.

And so now each Lent we journey with the Elect. In effect, we take 40 days to reflect on the fact that we were not baptized 20 or 30 or 50 years ago—we are baptized *now*. The mystery of our baptism continues to unfold in our lives, and continues to offer the grace and power to transform us.

We begin with Ash Wednesday by being marked with the cross on our foreheads, where we were first signed with the cross at our baptism. The cross is the great symbol of our faith, a constant reminder of the meaning and the power of our baptism. We modern Christians often fail to recognize the connection between the Cross and baptism. We typically think of baptism in terms of “washing away original sin.” While this is certainly accurate, early Christians understood its symbolism differently. They saw it not as washing but as dying. The immersion of baptism wasn’t so much a cleansing bath as it was *drowning* in the love of God. St. Paul writes in Romans 6:

Do you not know that in baptism you died with Christ and were buried with him? And if you were buried with him, you shall also rise with him.

The symbolism of the rite spoke of this dying to self. The Elect removed their clothes (which signified their old self); they were immersed three times (symbolizing their death); and then clothed in a white garment and instructed, “Put on Christ!” They were given a new name (a new identity) and anointed with the Holy Spirit—the breath of God—empowering them to live as Christ. In other words, baptism changed everything. Their old self had been united with Christ on Cross and died with him; they rose from the water a new person. St. Paul puts it plainly in Galatians 2:20:

I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me.

Baptism gives us a new identity as one who, having died to self, now lives for Christ. Each time we make the Sign of the Cross it should remind us of the meaning of our baptism. *We have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer we who live, but Christ who lives in us.*

Imagine what our lives would be like if we understood baptism this way.

And that is what Lent invites us to do—to imagine our lives as new people, who have died to ourselves and risen in Christ, and are living with new minds, new hearts, new spirits. In fact—believing that it is *Christ* living in us.

Our hope for this Scripture series is to help us do that. The Lenten Sunday readings have been used since the earliest centuries to help the Elect—and all of us—grasp the mystery and meaning of baptism. Each week they hold up inspired stories and symbols to help us go beyond a theological understanding and open ourselves to the sacrament’s grace and power.

While we will be focusing on the Sunday Gospel readings, begin by reading all of the Scriptures. Allow their words, images and messages to speak to you. The reflection for each week will share some insights on the Gospel story. The questions can help you apply the message to your life, and offer direction for further reflection and prayer.

A Lenten Canticle

R: Give us hearts of flesh, O God,
that we may live in you.

I will take you from among the nations,
gather you from among the foreign peoples,
and bring you back to your own land.

I will sprinkle clean water upon you
to cleanse you from all your impurities;
from all your idols I will cleanse you.

A new heart I will give you
and a new spirit will I place within you.

I will take out of your body the heart of stone
and give you a heart of flesh.

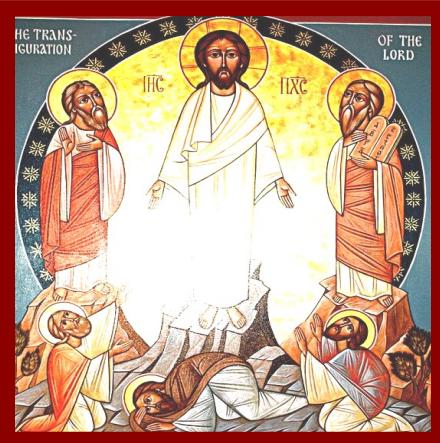
I will put my spirit within you,
and enable you to live by my commandments,
careful to observe all my decrees.

You shall dwell in the land
which I gave to your ancestors.

You shall be my people, and I will be your God.

R: Give us hearts of flesh, O God,
that we may live in you.

Ezekiel 36:24-28



Second Sunday of Lent

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Gen. 12:1-4a • 2 Tim. 1:8b-10 • Matt. 17:1-9

Those of us who are in our 30s or older might remember the Magic Eye pictures that were popular back in the 90s. On the surface they were bright, psychedelic images and patterns. But the trick was that if you stared at them in just the right way a whole different three-dimensional picture emerged—a ship sailing on a wild sea, or a freeze-

frame of a hummingbird in flight. While on the surface the picture seemed simply a mass of bright colors, if you looked at it differently you saw something far more complex, far more interesting.

The Transfiguration is a story about looking at things differently, about seeing Jesus, the Cross, and our own lives, in a whole new way. In order to better understand the story, we need to hear the passage in the larger context. A few verses earlier Jesus asks his disciples a question: “Who do you say that I am?” They had been following him for quite some time, listening to him preach and witnessing him perform healings and miracles. “Who do you say that I am?” he asks. Peter takes a risk and ventures, “You are the Christ, the Son of God.” It was a bold statement that expressed what he believed, what he hoped, was true. Jesus praises Peter’s faith, but then goes on to say: “I am going to Jerusalem, where I will be rejected by the people, arrested by the leaders, tortured, and put to death.”

Peter reacts immediately: “Lord, this must not be!” Because Jesus words didn’t fit into Peter’s understanding of the Christ. When Peter had said, “You are the Christ,” he meant that he saw Jesus as a savior—as someone who would be strong and conquer; a winner, not a loser; someone who would rule over others, not be defeated. But the Gospel says that Jesus rebuked Peter: “Get behind me, Satan. You are thinking the ways humans think, not the way God thinks.” And then Jesus adds: “And furthermore, if you are going to continue to be my disciple, you must deny yourself, take up your own cross, and follow me.”

All the apostles must have been very confused. Peter, Andrew, James and John had left everything to follow Jesus. And all along the way Jesus has been healing the lepers, the blind and the lame, and preaching about the kingdom of God. But now, suddenly, everything changes. The man they have given up everything to follow, the man who they have placed their faith in, announces that he is going to Jerusalem—not to conquer—but to be rejected, suffer and die.

Now, as they make their way toward Jerusalem, Jesus takes Peter, James and John up a mountain and there he is changed—transfigured—into something beyond their imagination. Like looking at one of those Magic Eye pictures, a whole new image emerges. His face, his clothing, his whole being surpasses anything they have ever seen. They see Jesus differently, as someone infinitely beyond what they had thought him to be. And then, it is over. Jesus touches them; they head down the mountain and continue their walk to Jerusalem.

The apostles saw it, but I doubt they understood the message any better than we do. The Transfiguration is not only about Jesus; it’s about us, as well. We, too, will be changed—transfigured. That is the promise of God. In spite of our doubts and fears, God promises that we will shine like the sun; we will be transformed into something beyond our imagination. As St. John writes in his first epistle: “What we will become is not yet revealed, but when it is revealed, we shall be like him.”

But in order to experience that promise we need to look at our lives differently. So often we believe that if we live well—if we are good and kind and loving—then our lives should go well. The suffering and difficulties of live are punishments, or the consequences of sin or poor choices, or tests from God. But the Gospel isn’t a set of rules that rewards us with a happy life if we follow them. The Gospel doesn’t promise us success, or prosperity.

What the Gospel promises is the *fullness* of life, and that doesn’t necessarily look like what we would expect. It is infinitely beyond what we have ever imagined. As St. John said, we shall become like him. We shall become what God created us to be, the image and likeness of God himself. Like the Magic Eye picture, we need to be willing to look beyond the surface of our lives—past our desires for comfort, for success, for control or whatever it ease that we dream of—to realize that God has something infinitely greater in mind for us.

But, the Gospel also tells us, the way to that fullness is through the Cross. We are not greater than the Christ, who himself was transfigured through rejection, suffering and death. We only become what we were created to be through our own crosses. We need to look at the crosses in our own lives differently. They are not punishments from an angry God, nor

tests sent to test our faith. The conflicts in our marriages, the struggles with our children, our problems at school or work; our addictions, illnesses, fears and worries are the normal experiences of the human condition, the same human condition embraced by the Son of God who became man. They are the part of life that provides the opportunity for us to grow beyond what we are now, to become what God created us to be. They challenge us to let go of our selfishness, our materialism, and fear so as to become more loving, more patient, more compassionate—to die to ourselves to become more like our God. The message of the Gospel is that it is in fact only through these things, through the Cross, that we are transfigured into what God has promised us.

We hear this story of the Transfiguration every year on this Second Sunday of Lent for a very good reason. At Easter the Elect will be baptized, and we who are already baptized will renew our baptismal promises. As Peter once did, we will profess our faith that Jesus is the Christ, and profess our commitment to follow him.

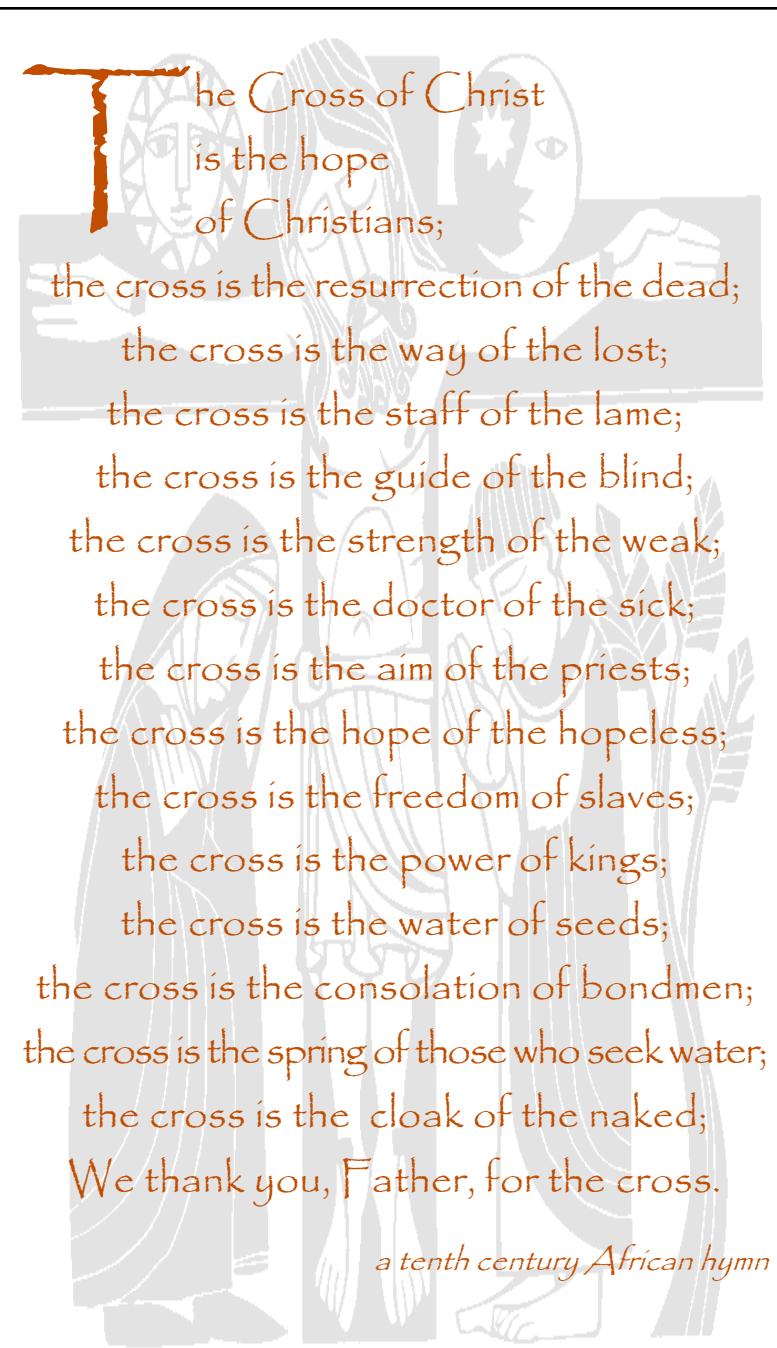
The Transfiguration invites us to see Jesus and our own lives differently. Our acts of penance, prayer, fasting and almsgiving can help us see through the temptations and struggles and suffering of our everyday lives to recognize them as something more. They are the way that Jesus walked in this life, the way through which he came to his own transfiguration, the way of the Christ. Lent can help us see the trials and struggles as the way that God is transforming us into something new, something beyond what we have even imagined.

May our Lord lead each of us up that mountaintop this Lent. When he does, may we look intently. May we see ourselves and our lives with new eyes and be filled with new hope. May we, like the disciples, be filled with awe at what we see. And may we, like them, be willing to come down the mountain and follow him to Jerusalem.

For Reflection & Prayer

† The Transfiguration reminds us that God brings glory out of Jesus' suffering and death. Where in your own life has God used suffering, challenges or difficulty to bring you new life, new hope or new vision?

† St. James exhorts us to "be doers of the Word, and not hearers only" (James 1:22). What is one thing you can do this week to put the message of this Scripture into action?



a tenth century African hymn