

Whenever the Second Sunday of Lent rolls around, and the Gospel of the Transfiguration is read, I always have to pause, because to me, at first glance, this story feels out of place. On the First Sunday of Lent, the Gospel draws us into Jesus' time in the desert, where he was tempted by Satan, where he fasted for 40 days and was hungry. That was a time of struggle and deprivation. But this week, Jesus' face changes, his clothes become dazzling bright. It seems more like an Easter Gospel. And yet, it is a Lenten Gospel. First off, because chronologically, the Transfiguration comes before Easter. But on a deeper level, the Transfiguration was a moment of preparation for Good Friday. We just read that Jesus was discussing with Moses and Elijah about his "exodus" that he was to accomplish in Jerusalem. That means his sacrifice. So, the Transfiguration was Jesus' way of preparing the apostles for that moment of loss, and scandal. The Transfiguration was meant to strengthen them so that they could face his Passion with courage. We all know that that didn't go as planned. And so, the Transfiguration is a Gospel meant for Lent, because it is preparation for the Passion. The glory that we see in Jesus on the mountain will be revealed again at Easter, but the way to get there comes through one way, and one way only, the Cross.

The basilica used to show this connection between the Transfiguration and the Cross quite clearly. Some of you may remember that on either side of the stained-glass window of the Crucifixion used to be a painting. On the left was a painting of Jesus in his agony in the garden, and on the right was a painting of the Transfiguration. All three of these moments go together because they are "mountaintop" moments. In the Old Testament the mountain is where people encountered God. Moses, who was mentioned in the Gospel today, encountered God on Mt. Sinai, where he stayed for 40 days, receiving the Law. Elijah, who was also mentioned in the Gospel, encountered God on a mountain as well. We know that Jesus led the three apostles up a mountain for the Transfiguration. His agony in the garden took place on the Mount of Olives, and the Crucifixion took place on Mount Calvary, also known as Golgatha. Indeed, on the Cross, the glory of God was revealed as well. On Good Friday, as Jesus was being crucified, a Roman soldier looked up at him and declared, "This man truly was the Son of God" (Mk 15:39). The Cross reveals God because the Cross was God's great act of love. This is why St. Paul tells us today to become imitators of him, he who said, "I have been crucified with Christ; yet I live, no longer I, but Christ lives in me; insofar as I now live in the flesh, I live by faith in the Son of God who has loved me and given himself up for me. (Galatians 2:19-20).

And this is a challenge. To go to the Cross in our own lives means confronting our smallness, our weakness, our sinfulness. Which is why going up the mountain is a wonderful metaphor for the Christian life. God calls us to himself, but to get to Him, we must put in the effort. We must work, we must climb, which is difficult. I remember from my time in the Boy Scouts how difficult some of our hikes were. Climbing mountains is hard, it can be a great struggle, but in the end, the destination, the view from the summit is always worth it.

I was reminded of this in a very clear way on Friday. On Friday morning I flew into Denver to assist at the funeral of that young woman, Molly, who I have been informing the community about. Molly passed away a couple of weeks ago at the age of 23. She and her fiancé, Drew, had been attending St. Joe's for about a year; they were regulars at the 9:30am Mass. I wrote about her in last week's bulletin. At her vigil on Friday, I was watching the slideshow of pictures from her life, and being from Colorado, she had several pictures of her on hikes, standing at the summit of peaks, sometimes 14,000 feet in elevation. You can view these

photos on her Instagram page (Molly Corlett). These photos got me thinking about the Christian life, which Molly was so faithful to. Life is an uphill climb; sometimes it throws us for a loop, it sometimes makes no sense, but if we persevere, the view from the top is worth it.

Molly knew this, which is why she chose a quote from Pope St. John Paul II (JPII) as the banner for her Instagram page. The banner is a short line or two of information about oneself. Most often people mention their job or hobbies, but Molly chose this quote taken from a homily JPII gave to youth in the Czech Republic in 1997. The quote says, "Life with Christ is a wonderful adventure." Despite life's struggles, and losses, life with Christ is wonderful. And Pope John Paul II knew about adventures, both good and bad. He was the most travelled Pope in history and is known as being seen in person by more people than anyone else in history. When he would visit a country, 10s of thousands, sometimes hundreds of thousands of people would come to see him. Some people try to explain this away, saying that he accomplished this because he had better transportation than his predecessors, but that doesn't cut it. People showed up to see this Pope because they knew he was on an adventure, and they wanted to go with him. He had discovered that life with Christ was wonderful, and not just in good times, but in the difficult times as well, and this man lived through some difficult times.

JPII lost his mother when he was 8, he lost his brother not long after, he lost his father when he was 20. Born in 1920, he lived under Nazi rule and had to attend an underground seminary in the Archbishop of Krakow's residence. Then after the Nazi's were defeated the Communists came to power. But through all this, JPII was a man of joy. He loved teaching in the university and taking young people out into nature on camping trips. He was an outdoorsman. He loved hiking and skiing. He was an actor and a playwright. He knew that life with Christ was a wonderful adventure, no matter what, and the people saw this. They wanted to go along with him, and what's more, JPII wanted us to come along with him.

Molly saw this. In quoting JPII, it's almost as if she was preparing her family for this moment, for this loss, that even if we have to make the strenuous climb upward, life with Christ is a wonderful adventure. Some people don't want to make this climb. St. Paul tells us about them, that their god is their stomach. They want a life of comfort and pleasure. But Paul knew that the only way forward was the cross, which is love. This life isn't easy, which is why Paul tells us to "stand firm in the Lord." JPII knew this, which is why that quote that Molly chose begins with another couple of words, words that JPII used all the time, words that Jesus used all the time, "Do not be afraid." Do not be afraid, life with Christ is a wonderful adventure. Yes, it can be very difficult. It can seem like an upward climb, that tempts us to turn around and give up. Do not be afraid. Persevere. Continue to climb. It may be difficult, but the view from the top, it's worth it.