

It's interesting that on Transfiguration Sunday the Narrative Lectionary gets to the story by way of Jesus' hard words to his disciples, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me." He has just told them that he's headed for death, and Peter has reprimanded him for saying such a thing, so Jesus is doubling down on that unappetizing message. And it's a real doubling-down: when he mentions taking up a cross, we of course fast-forward to our images of Jesus hanging on the cross. But it was a whole thing. Crucifixion was intended to terrify observers, as a deterrent. So they made a big show of humiliating the convicted person, flogging them, making them carry the very instrument of their death to the execution site. Crucifixion was a performance by the state whose message was: "You lose. We win." For Jesus to imply that *he* would carry a cross, not to mention that his followers would carry their own crosses, is for him to suggest that they are all going to be labeled losers and die painfully.

That's the backdrop against which the Transfiguration takes place. On top of a "high mountain," Jesus takes on the appearance of holiness, with a shining face and white garments. Moses and Elijah appear. Moses and Elijah were eschatological figures for first-century Jews. Elijah had never died, but had been carried into heaven by a chariot of fire. Moses was said to have died, but his grave was not found (or findable?), so there was some sense that he might also be living. So the two of them, if they appeared, would presage the coming of the Messiah. To make things *really* clear, a voice from a cloud identifies Jesus as God's Son, the Beloved, and tells the disciples to listen to him.

So clearly the guy who is God's beloved is also the one who is going to carry a

cross and be labeled a loser. The guy whose appearance is like a manifestation of the divine is the very one who anticipates being stopped and killed brutally. Later on, looking back, Jesus' followers must have considered his life story and trajectory and recognized that he was headed for trouble from very early on, even if they weren't fully aware of it at the time. The Transfiguration story is a momentary glimpse of something else true that is yet to come.

The "take up your cross" language has sometimes been used in a toxic way, to suggest that suffering is in itself good, that somehow self-denial or self-punishment makes you a better person or a holier person. Extremists have literally worn hair shirts or flagellated themselves in order to suffer. People—especially women--have tolerated violence against themselves that should not have been tolerated, in the name of taking up their cross. But Jesus didn't spend his life suffering; he spent it enjoying other people's company and helping them. In fact, it was his appreciation of people who didn't fit in, and his insistence on standing up for them in the name of God, that got him crucified. So what we're meant to hear is that we should imitate him in those things, have that orientation of love and service, and if *that* leads to us being labeled as losers or threatened with death, that's not a sign that we're doing anything wrong. It shouldn't deter us.

Jesus says, "Those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it. For what will it profit them if they gain the whole world but forfeit their life?" As Justin pointed out a few weeks ago with his parallels to "Star Wars," you lose your real life when you pursue such a narrow, self-interested agenda that it causes you to deny your very nature and purpose. You lose

the very thing you're trying to save when you ignore the fact that you're part of a much bigger enterprise, the kingdom of God. Jesus did not try to save his own life, because if he could not enjoy people and help people, it wasn't worth living. The Transfiguration juxtaposed against his prediction of death is a call to us to live our real lives purposefully, lose our small selves in the greater and more real enterprise which is the kingdom.

All the major world religions are programs to help people get out from under their egos and see the bigger reality. Just as with Christianity, each program is vulnerable to misunderstanding. Even today, there are Hindu ascetics who devote themselves to strange and disfiguring disciplines, like standing on one foot for a lifetime, sleeping only by leaning into a hammock that someone has rigged up for them. I'm not a Hindu, but I think that's not what Hinduism is really about. I don't think extreme self-discipline subdues the ego; rather, it reinforces it because the more you suffer the more you are aware of your tremendous spiritual strength, and that just builds up the ego. The Buddha, who tried that level of asceticism, ultimately rejected it and taught the Middle Way: too much voluntary suffering reinforces ego and did not help practitioners see more clearly.

The juxtaposition of Jesus' grim words about the cross with the unearthly vision of the Transfiguration challenges us to think about what we think is real. Even though Peter rebukes Jesus for predicting that he'll be killed, the rebuke comes because Peter is frightened—this is all too real a possibility, that Jesus will get into serious trouble with the religious or civil authorities. The Transfiguration, on the other hand, is a moment out of time: on a mountain, in the presence of two towering

historical figures, Jesus shining and clothed in white. That must not be real, but a vision. Yet what has been seen cannot be unseen, and Peter, James, and John have to begin to recognize that perhaps the mountaintop is what's real and the limits with which we live and struggle every day are what are transitory. The gleaming communion with past and future is a flash of eternity, just behind the gray days and cold nights of early March.

Terri Gross once interviewed Fr. Greg Boyle, who's known for his transformational work with gang members in Los Angeles, about the details of his work with gang members. She asked him if he talks about the gospel with the kids. He replied, "Not really. It's more important to live as if the truth were true, to go where love has not yet arrived, choose to stand with the folks that God chooses to stand with." Live as if the truth were true, because actually it is.

In 2017 Krista Tippett interviewed Fr. Greg Boyle. Because he's a Jesuit, he brings up a meditation called "The Two Standards" by St. Ignatius, who founded the order. In it, St. Ignatius says, "See Jesus standing in the lowly place." See Jesus standing in the lowly place. See him, because he's actually there. And Boyle goes on,

I haven't found anything that's brought me more life or joy than standing with Jesus, but also with the particularity of standing in the lowly place with the easily despised and the readily left out, and with the demonized so that the demonizing will stop, and with the disposable so that the day will come when we stop throwing people away. And I find the fullness of life in trying to, as best I can, in my own way, to stand there.

<https://onbeing.org/programs/greg-boyle-the-calling-of-delight-gangs-service-and-kinship-nov2017/#transcript>

That is the reality. We can be overwhelmed by the temporary and transitory grimness of every day, but the reality is that Jesus is right here, right now, and we are part of his very real company of kindred souls. We immerse ourselves in

everyday redemptive work, and we are redeemed.

Transfiguring God, who breaks in on our lives unexpectedly, we thank you that you are what is permanent and faith is what's most real. When we get confused and think our trials are the truth and your promises just stories, come crashing in on us in some marvel large or small until we learn to see you in each other's faces. Be with those who are sick this day, especially with anyone who is facing uncertain treatment or hard tests. Be with anyone who is lonely and help them feel your presence in these words. Give encouragement to the timid and awaken those who are convinced they alone are responsible for whatever good surrounds them. Break in on those who are too content until their contentment depends on sharing. For we ask in the name of him who came to reveal your love for the world. Amen.