

Transfiguration Weekend (B/RCL): "Jesus, the Four Chaplains, and Us"
2 Kings 2:1-12; Mark 9:2-9
February 10-11, 2018
Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Manasquan, NJ

There's a beautiful stained glass window in the small but lovely chapel at Brigadier General William C. Doyle Memorial Cemetery, usually referred to as Arneytown. It's the veterans' cemetery out 195, near Cream Ridge. I've been privileged to preside at a number of services out there. The first time I visited I noticed a window showing a sinking ship and the faces of four men. I looked closer and saw these names inscribed on the window:

- Rabbi Alexander Goode
- Rev. George Fox
- Rev. Clark Poling
- Rev. John Washington

I went home and told Pastor Mark, and he said, "Oh, yeah, they're famous in military chaplaincy: the four chaplains who went down with the ship. It was sinking and they all gave their life jackets to soldiers."

Last Saturday, February 3rd, was the 75th anniversary of the sinking of the *Dorchester*, a U.S. military transport with 902 soldiers and citizens on board. It was torpedoed by a German U-boat about 100 miles from Greenland; less than a third of the passengers survived. It was so cold some of the lifeboats couldn't be pried from the frozen deck. Survivors recounted how the four chaplains calmly handed out life vests until the supply ran out and they gave away their own. Before the ship disappeared beneath the wintery waves less than 20 minutes later, they were last seen with interlocked arms, praying together on the deck. Each was posthumously awarded the Distinguished Service Cross and a Purple Heart.

These four men of faith are remembered and honored still, more than anyone else who perished **or** survived. Every year on the first Sunday of February there's a commemorative Mass

at St. Stephen's Roman Catholic Church in Kearny, where Father Washington served before he enlisted in 1942.¹ A 93-year-old who served as an altar boy with Fr. Washington attended the Mass last week and reflected how the priest had been a prize fighter before entering the seminary. In attendance were also relatives of Rabbi Goode, who had served at Beth Israel Synagogue in York, PA. I'm hoping there were Methodists there to remember Rev. Fox, a Methodist pastor, and members of the Reformed Church in America to remember Rev. Poling, an RCA pastor. **Every** person of faith of **any** tradition, though, has to stand in awe and thank God for such selflessness, such powerful witness to the two greatest commandments quoted by Jesus: that we should love God above all else and our neighbors as ourselves (Matt. 22: 37-39). Lest we think Rabbi Goode wouldn't have recognized that divine mandate, it wasn't original with Jesus; he drew it from the Jewish Law – the books of Deuteronomy (6:5) and Leviticus (19:18).

So what does this have to do with our Transfiguration readings? We had a great Bible study on the first one from 2 Kings. The *Celebrate* intro says:

Today's reading centers on the transfer of power and authority from the prophet Elijah to Elisha.²

When I read that, my first thought was, "But how many people **care** about the transfer of power and authority from Elijah to Elisha?" I love the details of the story, because I'm a Bible history buff, but I think the faith nugget comes when we look at the Gospel and ask what the connection is between Elijah passing the mantle to Elisha and Jesus being transfigured on the mount.

We **always** hear the Gospel of the Transfiguration the weekend before Ash Wednesday arrives and Lent begins. We hear how Jesus is **changed**, somehow, in the presence of His closest friends, Peter, James & John. The word for *changed* is basically *metamorphosis*, which even our younger members know is the term for the butterfly's transition from egg to caterpillar to pupa to swallowtail or Monarch or another lovely mariposa, papillon, fliegenvogel.... If you didn't already

know, would you **guess** that a tiny egg could become a butterfly? There's no visual, logical connection between the two, unless you're looking at incredible time lapse photography.

The Transfiguration is a foreshadowing of our Lord's resurrection; it's like coming attractions at the movies. The appearance of the risen Lord was **so changed** (we don't really know how) that Mary Magdalene in the Fourth Gospel and the disciples from Emmaus in St. Luke's Gospel don't even recognize Him as He stands right in front of them. In 1 John we read:

²Beloved, we are God's children now; what we will be has not yet been revealed. What we do know is this: when he is revealed, we will be like him, for we will see him as he is. (1 John 3:2)

The poet Gerard Manley Hopkins put it this way:

In a flash, at a trumpet crash,
I am all at once what Christ is, | since he was what I am, and
This Jack, joke, poor potsherd, | patch, matchwood, immortal diamond,
Is immortal diamond. ³

We, too, will be transformed, in some way we cannot even imagine.

But meanwhile: our Lord **heart**-ened His dear friends with that vision of glory on the mountaintop before they set their faces to Jerusalem where He would suffer and die. He **encourage**-d His disciples with a preview of His resurrection so they could withstand His Passion. We are given that glimpse of glory as well before we enter the Lenten wilderness where we are asked to meditate on His suffering love for us and to ask God's grace to alleviate the suffering of our brothers and sisters with the sacrifice of our creature pleasures or our precious time or the money God has allowed us to earn and that others need.

Elijah transfers power to Elisha and Jesus transferred power to His disciples **then** and He transfers it to us **now**. Those four chaplains weren't literally transfigured on the deck of the sinking *Dorchester*, but how could the lives of those who witnessed their sacrifice not have been transformed? In Luther's language Fr. Washington, Reverends Fox and Poling became "little

Christ's," sacrificing their lives for their brothers. Rabbi Goode's self-sacrifice calls to mind the line from the Talmud recalled in *Schindler's List*: "To save one life is to save the world entire."

Sacrifice for sacrifice's sake may be no more than masochism. That's not holy or healthy. The four chaplains' sacrifice was life-giving, because in laying down their lives they truly loved neighbor as self, as God commands. Let your Lenten sacrifice be life-affirming and not just self-denying. If you give up your daily latte, give that money to the poor. If you give up TV, be sure what you do instead refreshes your spirit! Maybe your sacrifice will be adding, not deleting something from your life: committing to a weekly visit to a homebound relative or friend? Signing up to sleep on a cot and spend one night with our Family Promise guests?

We've enjoyed the vision of glory on the Mount; now it's time to head down to the plain and minister, enabled by our Lord's transfer of power to us in Holy Baptism. We probably won't be called to go down with the ship. But let's not underestimate the power of the small. Remember Emily Dickinson's go-to philosophy:

I shall not live in vain;
If I can ease one life the aching,
Or cool one pain,
Or help one fainting robin 5
Unto his nest again,
I shall not live in vain.⁴

Amen.

¹Sharon Otterman, "Remembering Four Chaplains and Their Sacrifice," *NY Times*, February 4, 2018, A15.

²*Celebrate* (Augsburg Fortress, Vol. 49, #1), Transfiguration of Our Lord, February 11, 2018.

³Gerard Manley Hopkins, "*That Nature is a Heraclitean Fire and of the comfort of the Resurrection.*"

⁴Emily Dickinson, Part One: Life (VI), *Complete Poems* (1924) Bartleby.com.

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