

[Readings: Daniel 7:9-10, 13-14; Psalm 97; 2 Peter 1:16-19; Matt. 17:1-9]

When I was a student at Orchard Lake St. Mary's College, saying this Feast Day in Polish was a challenge: Swiето Przemieninie Panskiego – try saying THAT fast five times! We seldom hear the readings for the Transfiguration because it is not a Holy Day of Obligation, unless like this year, it falls on a Sunday. That is why we have these readings today instead of the observance of the 18th Sunday of Ordinary Time.

The Book of Daniel is named after the hero of the stories in its first six chapters. Daniel, who has a special gift of wisdom, has been chosen along with three other young Jewish exiles in Babylon, to serve in the court of the King. These are the famous Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, who survive the fiery furnace and the lion's den. Beginning with Chapter 7, today's excerpt, we hear about a series of visions. They are called "apocalyptic" – a type of vivid, dramatic narrative written during times of persecution. It doesn't have the same "end of the world" tone that today's apocalyptic movies have. These visions are meant to bring comfort and strength to those going through rough times. The Son of Man appears in majesty and glory. He is the precursor to the Messiah. Today's First Reading foreshadows what happens in today's Gospel.

St. Peter gives his own testimony to the Gospel in today's Second Reading. "We ourselves heard this voice come from heaven while we were with Him on the holy mountain." "This is my Son, my beloved, with whom I am well pleased." Parents, you have no idea how powerful these words are to your children, regardless of their age, when you say to them: "I'm proud of you."

Some background to today's Gospel. Jesus Christ has just completed the three years of His public ministry. He and his apostles and disciples are returning to Jerusalem for the High Holy Days of Passover. He is scheduled to enter the city gates within a few days on what would be forever known as Palm Sunday of the Passion of the Lord. He takes His three top Apostles (Peter, John and James) to a mountain top, where He is transfigured before their eyes.

The word “transfigured” in Greek means a couple of things. It literally means “the change of the body” but here, it is “the insides moving outside.” The inner glory of God shines on the outside. Imagine if OUR insides were made outside. We see someone we don’t like who approaches and greets us. Then WE say, “Hi, I hate your guts!” But the insides of Jesus reveal divine love and majesty. In that same scene Moses (representing the Jewish Law) and Elijah (representing the prophets) also appear and converse with the Lord. Matthew is saying here that as important as Moses and Elijah are, Jesus is even greater.

Most Bible scholars agree that this was the “last hurrah” miracle of human encouragement that Jesus gives His friends before He would be arrested, tortured, and killed, and then risen from the dead. Jesus wants joyful, missionary disciples. This glimpse of His current and future glory helps bring that about.

You and I are You and I are today’s “joyful, missionary disciples” who once in a while need that refreshing boost to continue on what can be a tiring and perilous life journey in faith. The Transfiguration is meant to be a morale booster.

What dangers are exhausting you today? What struggles, illness and issues do you bring to the mountaintop to be transformed, transfigured?

Archbishop Allen Vigneron, in his pastoral letter, “Unleash the Gospel,” has words of encouragement for families to be “transformed” into joyful, missionary disciples. To be stronger families and to become a brighter witness to our culture. I include them in today’ bulletin. I hope you get a chance to share these with all the members of your household and your families. They are:

Reclaim Sunday as a family day. Make it a priority in your lives to spend time together without distractions, including sharing Sunday meals together.

Commit to forming your family in the love and power of sacred Scripture by reading Scripture together. Read and pray the Sunday readings together before coming to Sunday Mass. Participate in Bible studies together and go to parish events to unleash the Gospel in your family. Discuss the Sunday homily.

Commit to developing prayer time together. Make time to listen, share, and grow together as a family guided by the Lord. Talk about faith, and share why your faith is important to you. Ask others what inspires their faith.

Participate in the Sacrament of Reconciliation as a family. Get to Confession. Try to heal wounds and brokenness in your family through sacrifice, forgiveness, mercy, and love. Pope Francis says the three phrases you need to say the most are: “Thank you,” “May I?” and “I’m sorry.” How often do we say these words? When was the last time we said them to our loved ones?

Create a home where your family models Christ’s love. Help others by becoming aware of your neighbor’s needs and by reaching out to them as a family with a welcoming spirit so as to share your faith living and in action.

I am inspired and humbled when I visit our homebound parishioners. They tell me about you folks taking care of their very practical needs. You shovel their snow and cut their grass. You run errands for them and take them to the doctor. You bring the Blessed Sacrament to them in Holy Communion. In this way you preach a better homily than I ever could from this pulpit.

Parents, remember that you are called to be “the first and the best” teachers of faith for your family. If you don’t know the answer to faith questions, learn them! Commit to trying at least one or two or three of these suggestions. Let the Holy Spirit come upon you and overshadow you. Be transfigured. Open wide the doors of your heart. Be not afraid to “Unleash the Gospel!” AMEN!

[Readings: I Kings 19:9a, 11-13a; Psalm 85; Romans 9:1-5; Matt 14:22-23]

Once upon a time, a famous mountain climber began his most challenging task – to journey up the tallest and most dangerous mountain he had ever attempted. The journey took five days of slipping and sliding in sub-zero temperatures, blistering winds and unending blizzards. He could barely see the pinnacle of the mountain. It was within hours of reach. A great smile grew on his face as he began what obviously would be the last leg of his climb.

Getting closer to the summit, his foot slipped on a ledge and propelled him downward. Only his security rope held him still, dangling over the side of the mountain. His first mistake? He attempted the climb alone. No one was near him to save him. His second mistake? He attempted the climb on one of the worst weather days ever. He wasn't a religious man, but in desperation he cried out, "Help me, God!"

A gentle but firm voice was heard through the icy wind. "Do you trust Me?" was the question. "Yes, God, if that is you, I trust you. Help me!" "Cut yourself from the rope." "Is there anyone else up there?" "If you trust Me, cut the rope!" The man refused. His body was found a week later, frozen stiff. And hanging only ten feet above another ledge which would have saved his life.

This story sounds a lot like today's Gospel, doesn't it? The Divine Voice cries out, "Come!" "Cut the rope!" "Trust Me!" But we don't want to cut the rope, do we? We don't want to walk on deep and stormy waters, do we? We don't want to risk the unknown, the uncertain, the unproven. And so we die. We lose.

If we always do what we've always done, we always get what we've always got. We cannot expect God to deliver us from impossible situations if we ourselves are too frightened, too weak or too cowardly to trust Him.

How do we know that God is calling out to us? Do we expect to feel a strong and heavy wind or some rattling earthquake or some bombastic fire to prove God's presence and care for us? If so, then we reduce God to nothing more than a clever magician who can do what used to be called "parlor tricks." Our God is much more grand and glorious than that!

In today's First Reading, Elijah expected God to be revealed in epic proportions. But God is revealed in a "tiny, whispering sound." Elijah was given the grace to comprehend, to understand. And so he hides his face in his cloak as a sign of humility and submission. He stands at the entrance of a cave ready to do what God wants.

Ironically, the Apostles find God in the very "eye of the storm," don't they? In the midst of the chaos of their ship being tossed about offshore. It was "the fourth watch." That means that it was 3:00 in the morning. If you cannot sleep, 3 AM is tossing- and-turning time. If someone isn't home by 3 AM, it's pace-the-floor time. If the telephone rings at 3 AM, it's palm-sweating time. It is the worst of times. It suggests fear and helplessness, worry and regret, loss and despair.

For Benedictine Sister Joan Chittister, it is the best of times. She says that God is found "in the little things that shape our lives. In the contradictions that assail us, in the circumstances that challenge us, in the burdens that wear us down, in the actions that give witness to the values in our heart. God is in the stuff of life." Elijah is running away from his enemies and God asks him, "Why are you taking the easy way out?" Peter begins to sink and Jesus asks, "Where is your trust?" Elijah is sent back to continue his ministry and to pass the mantle onto the shoulders of Elisha to take over. We know what happens with St. Peter.

Look at the drastic lengths St. Paul is willing to go through if only his fellow Jews would have a change of heart and mind and come to the Lord Jesus Christ. He says that he would even be willing to be "cut off from Christ" if it meant the salvation of souls. He would sacrifice his own personal faith if it inspired others.

Maybe you and I, in our noble attempts to bring others to Christ and to the Catholic Church, or to a greater practice of the Catholic faith, feel like we have been "cut off from Christ" as a result of our efforts. In frustration, we might ask, "Lord, how come You are not answering my prayers? Why have my loved ones fallen out of grace and You are not working their way back to You?" This may be the thickest and the strongest rope of all we are still clinging to. "Cut the rope!"

Maybe we will find the answers in the waiting, loving arms of God. AMEN!

[Readings: Rev. 11:19a; 12:1a-6a, 10 ab; Ps. 45; 1 Cor 15:20-27; Lk. 1:39-56]

Twenty years ago, a newspaper described some new guest suites at the Grand Hotel on Mackinac Island. The hotel was unveiling five new “First Lady Suites” in honor of five American presidents’ wives. Lady Bird Johnson, Betty Ford, Rosalyn Carter, Nancy Reagan and Barbara Bush provided advice on décor and memorabilia for the suites. Each suite has the official White House portrait of, and autographed books from, the First Lady after whom it is named, as well as a brass plate with her signature over the door. The memorabilia and special colors used in each suite reflect the individual tastes of each First Lady.

Today we celebrate the day when God brought the Blessed Virgin Mary into the Heavenly Suite prepared for her. Mary is the First Lady of the Church because she is the Mother of God. We might wonder how HER suite in Heaven is decorated! Is Mary’s “official portrait” there? No, there aren’t any. Any autographed books? No, Mary didn’t have any contracts with any publishers.

Mary’s Suite in Heaven, God’s special place prepared for her, is decorated with what she herself left us. It is something that best expresses the meaning of her life, that marvelous song of praise and thanksgiving we just heard in today’s Gospel. We call this song the Magnificat, from the first word in its Latin version. Mary’s song is not about herself: it is about magnifying God’s work in and through her for us.

These words of the Magnificat show that after her Son, Mary most clearly embodied God’s saving plan, the way of living that Jesus preached. She was most like her Son in His self-sacrifice for the sake of humanity. Mary followed her Son, “the first fruits of those who have died into everlasting glory” because she followed her Son along the ways of God’s Kingdom on earth.

The image found in today’s First Reading is traditionally interpreted as a reference to Mary in Heaven: “She gave birth to a son, a male child, destined to rule all the nations with an iron rod.” But the image is also one for the Church, the living Body of Christ for all generations: “The woman fled into the desert where she had a place prepared by God.” The Church is still in “the desert.”

We know that in Old Testament times, “the desert” was the dwelling place of the devil and evil spirits. Jesus teaches us in the New Testament that “the desert” is a place where He goes on retreat, to be one with His Father in prayer. Such is the desert for us: it is both a place of sin, rejection and abandonment, and it is a place of renewal and rebirth.

Mary’s Assumption into Heaven is God’s testimony that Mary, the one most like her Son, already shares in the triumph of God’s risen life. St. Paul needs to explain to the people of Corinth that when we die, it’s not just a matter of the soul being freed from the body. One day the soul AND the body will rise.

My friends, you and I share in the same promise, the same hope that Mary now enjoys. On the day of our Baptism, we were called to die to sin and to the world, so that the Kingdom of God could take root and blossom in our lives. You and I are still walking the pilgrim way of faith on earth. Our eternal destiny has not yet come to pass. So what do we do in the meantime?

We welcome the Word of God into our lives. Each morning we rededicate our day to being the servant of the Lord. We ask, “Lord, what do YOU want me to do today to show Your presence in the world? How can I magnify YOU?”

We make choices that embrace the culture of life, not the culture of death. We make choices that respect and celebrate life, and we reject anything that will harm us or bring us closer to our death or the death of others.

We ask the Lord to open our eyes and our ears to hear the cry of the poor; not only the materially and financially poor, but those who need someone there to listen, to counsel, to support. We show mercy along with justice when others are in need of it. We remember that wherever we go and whatever we do, whatever good or evil we have to endure, Jesus and Mary are watching us, interceding for us, protecting us and loving us. Even if it doesn’t seem so from all appearances.

Mary has gone before us like her Son to prepare OUR suite. May we live her Magnificat in this life, so that we may find ourselves neighbors in our eternal suite with Jesus and Mary in the next. Mary, Assumed into Heaven, pray for us!

[Readings: Isaiah 56:1, 6-7; Psalm 67; Romans 11:13-15, 29-32; Matt 15:21-28]

Last week, one person was killed and 19 were hurt when a speeding car slammed into a throng of counter-protesters in Charlottesville, Virginia, where a "Unite the Right" rally of white nationalist and other right-wing groups had been scheduled to take place. A 32-year-old woman was killed while walking across the street. Two Virginia State Patrol troopers were killed in a helicopter crash while assisting public safety with the ongoing situation in Charlottesville.

In addition to the one death and 19 injuries in the car-ramming incident, the city said there were at least 15 other injuries associated with the scheduled rally. Fistfights and screaming matches erupted Saturday, barely 12 hours after a scuffle Friday night at the nearby University of Virginia between torch-bearing demonstrators and counter-protesters.

How ridiculous prejudice is, yet how commonplace. From the earliest days that men and women have walked the earth, we have had this disturbing tendency to build walls, to separate people one from another. Whether barriers of race, nationality, religion or economic status, all of us can claim a share of guilt for maintaining those walls: the walls that separate US from THEM. In our readings, we hear of people who scale those walls to teach us all a lesson.

In the First Reading, we hear about the plight of foreigners and eunuchs who are afraid that they will be shunned and barred from the religious services of the Jews. They need not worry. Foreigners are welcomed warmly to the point of being deemed worthy of ministering to God and becoming God's servants. They are to be considered full participants in God's covenant relationship. No one is to be excluded who follows the spirit of God.

St. Paul extends this open welcome to all the non-Jews whom he has visited and to whom he has preached and served. Many of his fellow Jews refuse to believe in Jesus Christ and accept His salvation. So Paul turns to all the other nations of the known world and makes no fewer than three "missionary journeys" to all the known parts of the Western and Middle Eastern world. If the Jews do not listen, maybe other people will. Are WE listening?

This message reaches its high point in our Gospel. You think YOU'VE had a bad week? Look at Jesus. After John the Baptist is killed, Jesus withdraws, only to find more people needing nourishment, and He feeds more than five thousand! Crossing the lake, He calms the stormy seas and calls Peter to follow in faith. He heals many who are sick in Gennesaret before encountering yet another argument with some scribes and Pharisees over the interpretation of the Jewish law. He thinks he can get away with his apostles to the west coast cities of Tyre and Sidon, hoping to get a little rest. It is here that the Canaanite woman forces her way into the room and interrupts his fellowship.

The implied details of this meeting are lost on us. Way back in the Book of Genesis, Noah curses the Canaanites as the "lowest of slaves." The entire Book of Joshua tells the bloody story of Israel's conquest of the land of Canaan. Iraq. The fighting continues between Israelis and Palestinians to this day

The woman calls Jesus "Lord, Son of David." This woman – this Canaanite woman – is the first woman in the Gospel of Matthew to publicly identify Jesus as who He is! Then Jesus continues the conversation. Unheard of for a Jewish rabbi to speak publicly with a woman who was not his wife! In doing so, Jesus makes the woman his religious, cultural and earthly equal. Her last remark, "Yes, Lord, even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master's table," would merit her a perfect score of 10 in the Jewish/Christian Religious Olympics! She wins the gold medal for her "great faith!"

Who are the "Canaanite women" in our country and society today? What group of people make us cringe just by hearing the name of their group? The message of our readings today stretch us out of our comfort zones and our convenient boxes. When have YOU been welcomed, despite appearing to be an outsider, or feeling not deserving of love or forgiveness? How do we make ourselves a more welcoming community, a more welcoming household, a more welcoming family, a true "house of prayer?" How great is OUR faith? There are "the lowest of slaves" knocking on our church doors whose faith may be as great as the Canaanite woman's is. Will we let them in as Jesus did? AMEN!