March 15 - 16, 2014
SECOND SUNDAY OF LENT

There are some days you never forget—where you were, what you were thinking, how that day transformed your thinking, and your living… for all of the days that followed. What are those days for you? Perhaps it was the December Sunday when Pearl Harbor was bombed. Or the September day when the World Trade Center towers fell. Maybe it was the day your future spouse first smiled at you across the room and your heart skipped a beat. Or the day you felt your chest grip with the pain of your first heart attack. Was it the day your newborn child’s tiny hand wrapped around your finger? The day a bishop and brother priests placed their hands on my head. Or the wedding day when you placed your daughter’s hand in the hand of her groom? There are some days you never forget.

Our Gospel today describes one of those days—an unforgettable day—in the life of Jesus and his disciples. Jesus had just told his disciples that the destination of their journey, and of his life mission,
was the unimaginable suffering and death of a cross. (If you have seen the movie: **Son of God**, you’ve got the image!) The disciples were stunned, and some of them even tried to convince Jesus to take an easier path. In reply, Jesus told them that his suffering and death would also be the course for them, telling them (and us?) that any follower must be willing to take up a cross too, to be willing to lay down his life for the sake of obedience to God. The path to glory passes through the dark tunnel of suffering.

That was a sobering announcement. Immediately on the heels of this somber word, Jesus retreated to a mountaintop, taking Peter, James, and John. These are the same three disciples who would be invited to go a step further into the Garden of Gethsemane to watch Jesus agonize in prayer the night before he was arrested. Why these three? We do not know, but we do know they were eyewitnesses to some of the highest, and also some of the darkest, moments in the earthly life of our Lord.

The climb up that mountain must have been exhausting, both physically and emotionally, especially since the disciples were still
reeling from Jesus’ awful prediction. When they reached the summit, the weary disciples experienced something that frightened them, confused them, and ultimately transformed them. Jesus began to glow with an otherworldly light. His face and clothing became as bright as the sun, washing out every other color around them, blinding them to any other sight. As they later realized, they were catching a glimpse of the glory of Jesus. In that moment, the disciples also saw Jesus flanked by Moses and Elijah, talking with them about the course of suffering Jesus had set his course to follow. What an amazing sight that must have been!

Here are the two giants of the Old Testament story; Moses, the greatest of the Lawgivers, and Elijah, the greatest of the prophets. In the middle, Jesus, who had come to fulfill both the Law and the prophets. Moses and Elijah were not only the twin towers of Old Testament faith, they also shared a common understanding of the course Jesus followed. Both Moses and Elijah had their faith forged in the wilderness, they endured profound suffering, experienced rejection by the very people
they were called to lead and love. According to the Old Testament story, Elijah never died at all. He was whisked away from earth by a fiery chariot to join God when his ministry was over. Moses was rescued from certain death at the hands of Pharaoh by the Exodus, a parting the Red Sea.

For Jesus there would be no fiery chariot, no miraculous escape. His hope, and his strength, lay in the glory that waited on the other side of the cross, on the far side of death’s door. For Jesus, the hope was not that God would rescue him from death, but that God’s redemptive plan to rescue humankind would be enacted by his death.

That hope was the light at the end of the dark tunnel of suffering which Jesus was entering. He had a calling even higher than self-preservation. Jesus was called to obedience to his Father’s will and mission. That was his greatest joy, his only purpose, his guiding star. And that single-minded focus within Jesus made all the suffering worth the cost, and all of the potential distractions fade away. To punctuate the
moment even further, while the disciples were fumbling around for something significant to do or something profound to say, the voice of God clapped like thunder, with a repeat of the affirmation Jesus heard on another of his unforgettable days, his baptism. The voice of the Father said, once again, “This is my beloved Son, whom I love, and with whom I am well pleased.” To those present, the voice added, “Listen to him!”

Then just as suddenly as it erupted, the brightness faded, the disciples regained their normal sight, Moses and Elijah had vanished, and Jesus was alone with them again. But they would never be the same, not after that moment on that mountain. They would still struggle, as they tried to follow Jesus, to understand his curious and somber mission. But they would never forget that day when Jesus revealed his glory, and when they heard God affirm his mission.

Like all great memorable days in our lives, the farther away from it we get, the clearer it became in our hearts. Like a mountain is easier to see from a distance than up close… decades later John would write, “We
have seen his glory”. Toward the end of his life, Peter would write about this moment, “We were eyewitnesses of his majesty....So do not be afraid when you go through painful trials. But rejoice that you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed” As far we know, James did not write about this day on the mountain, perhaps because he was the first of the disciples to suffer martyrdom, and his life was cut short.

So this is the message of the Transfiguration, for Jesus and for us who follow him. The way of self-sacrifice for the sake of God, even if it leads though suffering, is the path to joy, and to glory. Keep the end in mind; not the moment of death, but the endless moments on the other side of death, in fellowship with the God who claims us as His own, who loves us to death, and beyond. Better to trade a bushel of ordinary forgotten moments, squandered and wasted on self-gratification, for a single unforgettable day that gives an entire life purpose and calling. It’s those days that leave the world better than we found it, don’t you think?
There are some days that you can simply never forget!