

Transfiguration
August 6, 2023

At exactly fifteen minutes past eight in the morning, on August 6, 1945, at the moment when the atomic bomb flashed above Hiroshima, Father Wilhelm Kleinsorge, of the Society of Jesus, was in a rather frail condition.

This weary priest woke up at about six on the morning the day the bomb was dropped, and half an hour later, he went in and had breakfast with the other clergy in his house. Then the unthinkable happened - something that made him think of a large meteor colliding with the earth.

After the terrible flash—he had time (since he was 1,400 yards from the center) for one thought: A bomb has fallen directly on us. Then, for a few seconds or minutes, he went out of his mind.

Today is not only the 78th anniversary of the bombing of Hiroshima, it is the Feast of the Transfiguration. It is not difficult to see how these two events cross over. One is a flash of terror that destroyed the lives of approximately 140,000 people, mostly civilians. On the other hand, the feast of the Transfiguration celebrates the glorification of Jesus - the appearance of his face changing and his clothes becoming dazzling white - quite the opposite of the terror of the nuclear bomb. Terror is a theme in both of these stories - Peter, James and John were terrified when the cloud overshadowed them and the people of Hiroshima who managed to survive the bombing were also engulfed in terror.

In this reading, on the feast of the Transfiguration Jesus goes to the mountaintop. He makes an intentional decision by taking this journey and in the process, he was changed. Jesus had gone up on the mountain to pray, a wonderful place to go for prayer. There is no question when you have climbed a mountain and are able to look out at the world around you, something inside of you changes. Somehow the glory of God's power and might come rushing at you. If it is a nice day, the majesty of God will shine through the heavens and if it is not so nice, you become aware of God's might in different ways. The difference between fear and wonder is sometimes not all that apparent but whenever these dramatic things happen they shake us up, turn us upside down and whirl us all around. And then we, along with the disciples who accompanied Jesus on this

magnificent journey - we fall down and try to sort out the meaning. What is God saying to us?

For Jesus, this mountaintop experience included extraordinary elements. While he was praying, the appearance of his face changed and his clothes became dazzling white. Try to imagine this. The word transfiguration means a complete change of appearance and form such as a caterpillar becoming a butterfly. And then these two prophets Moses and Elijah, who had died many years before - show up on the scene. And it must have been just amazing. But as so often happens with Peter and the other disciples, Luke tells us that they were weighed down with sleep. How could they possibly be sleepy with all of this going on. But they evidently are somewhat alert because Peter calls them together to build dwelling places for the visitors from the past. And then we have the climax of the story in which Jesus' divine identity is revealed as a voice cries out "This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him."

In terms of a faith experience, transformation can arrive at unexpected times. What's important is for us to pay attention and be open to these experiences when they present themselves to us. For us, this feast day gives us the time and space to remember our mountaintop experiences and glory in the love of God.

Then there is the bombing of Hiroshima which is anything but an experience of the love of God.

On Friday, my husband and I went to a jam-packed matinee showing of the new movie Oppenheimer, which as you undoubtedly know is the story of J Robert Oppenheimer's creation of the Atomic Bomb that was first dropped on Hiroshima and then Nagasaki. The movie is not just the story of Oppenheimer's brilliance and success as a physicist. It is also the story of the destruction of his career and his personal struggles with the monstrosity he had created.

The juxtaposition of the Feast of the Transfiguration and the bombing of Hiroshima is worth pondering. Ultimate goodness posited against ultimate evil. The Feast of the Transfiguration is a story that gives us strength to absorb the power of the holy. It empowers us to put our energy, our spiritual energy toward good. Pondering what happened on that dreadful day in August of 1945 does quite the opposite.

The crowds that are flocking to see Oppenheimer is a bit of a mystery. A week before we were able to see the movie, I had a conversation about it

with someone who I would not have imagined having an interest in a movie such as Oppenheimer. Then it all became clear - Cillian Murphy, the actor who plays Oppenheimer, and his smiling brilliantly blue Irish eyes. That was the draw! If people are packing the theaters because of Cillian Murphy, well they just might learn some very important history.

This movie is full of suffering, with Oppenheimer himself suffering greatly as the government stripped him of his security clearance, an action that destroyed his career. Thich Nhat Hanh, the world renowned Vietnamese Buddhist monk, taught a great deal about suffering. At one point he wrote, "We have the tendency to run away from suffering and to look for happiness. But, in fact, if you have not suffered you have no chance to experience happiness."

The story of the Transfiguration with all its glory cannot be fully appreciated if we try to avoid suffering. We can embrace suffering in so many ways, by walking with those who suffer, by learning the stories of those who have suffered as well as dealing with the suffering of our own lives. Learning of the suffering of others enables us to grow spiritually. This is why we do programs such as Sacred Ground which bring us into the suffering caused by racial injustice.

Cyril of Alexandria, one of the early church fathers had this to say about Jesus' suffering: "How would it have been fitting for Christ to abandon his love for the world and depart from his purpose of suffering on its behalf."

Gregory of Nazianzus, another one of the church fathers, also commented on this passage: "Jesus was bright as the lightening on the mountain, and became more luminous than the sun, initiating us into the mystery of the future."

These words - "initiating us into the mystery of the future" are one way of explaining what the Feast of the Transfiguration means for us. As we stay present to the here and now, we also know that the future is unknown. There is so much uncertainty in this confused and conflicted world of ours. A short segment from Amanda Gorman's now famous Inaugural poem "The Hill we Climb." sheds some light on how these trying times might indeed be transformed.

"Let the globe, if nothing else, say this is true
That even as we grieved, we grew,
That even as we hurt, we hoped,
That even as we tired, we tried.

That we'll forever be tied together.
Victorious.

As people of faith, the one thing we know for sure is that Jesus, enveloped in dazzling white clothes, will always be at our side, now and forever. May the victory of dazzling Christian love be with us all on this great feast of the Transfiguration.