

*Faith for Tough Times*

My great-grandfather' John Bealefeld, better known as "Poppy," had three sons, Pete, Buck and Barney. All three of them served in the U.S. Army during World War II. My grandmother used to recall how at the end of the work day then, while his sons were off at war, Poppy would sit on the porch and just stare off into the distance. His physical body was there at his home, but his mind's eye was off in France, Italy, and Germany with his boys. By God's grace all three came home safe and sound. Still, war takes its toll emotionally and spiritually both on the soldiers and their families.

My grandparents, James and Eleanor Ash, lived through the Great depression of the 1930's. Certainly there were times when money was tight, food was scarce, and work was hard to come by. Even though they survived, the memory of those tough times stayed with them. The specter of financially insecurity haunted them and they never could really enjoy the prosperity that came years later.

My father, Jimmy Ash, had a major heart attack when he was just thirty-eight years old. He survived and recovered, and eventually went back to work. But over the following thirty years he had several more attacks until his passing at age sixty-eight. Concerns about my father's health dogged my parents for many years.

These situations I described in my family are neither unique nor special.

Every family has similar stories in their history, I'm sure. Of course, these

situations are not just isolated incidents in history, they are contemporary too. We have the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, and the potential for war in numerous spots around the world. We also are in the midst of economic crisis the likes of which the world hasn't seen since the Great Depression. Many of us here have seen our pension funds dwindle. Others have lost their jobs, some have lost their homes. And each week we have a long list of sick people on our prayer list. All of this raises the age-old question: Why does an all good, all powerful God allow bad things to happen, especially to good people?

That question is especially pertinent because throughout this season of Sundays after the Epiphany we have been hearing in the gospel reading each week about Jesus' miracles. We have heard how Jesus cleansed lepers, cast out demons, and healed the sick. Yet we know that in our own experience not everyone comes home from the wars alive, not everyone recovers from poverty, and not every sick person gets healed. It's only natural when we find ourselves in tough, troubled times to ask Jesus, "Where's my miracle? Where's my healing?"

I would not presume to say that I can explain why God allows what He allows. No one knows the inner workings of the mind of God. His ways are inscrutable. However, God does reveal just enough of His thoughts in Holy Scripture to give us comfort and hope even when times are bad. The story of Jesus' transfiguration can shed some light on that for us.

To recap the story, Jesus takes Peter, John and James with him up a mountain. There Moses and Elijah, two great heroes from the Old

Testament, appear, and Jesus is transfigured – he takes on a glorious, otherworldly appearance. A cloud overshadows them and a voice from heaven is heard proclaiming Jesus to be God’s beloved Son. After the cloud dissipates, the disciples see Jesus only. As they descend the mountain, Jesus tells the three disciples to tell no one what they had seen until, get this, after he had been raised from the dead. It seems counterintuitive that Jesus, the one who was just transfigured and proclaimed God’s beloved Son, should have to suffer and die, but there it is.

We don’t have a ready explanation as to why there is pain and suffering of all sorts in the world when God could wipe it all out with a word. But we do have a Savior who suffers along side us. Obviously there must be some deeper meaning, some greater purpose in the mysteries of suffering and death that it’s hard for us to understand on this side of heaven. Everything that happens must happen for some purpose, and even the worst things must have some part in God’s ultimate plan for the universe, although we may not understand how until God’s kingdom comes.

What struck me most as I read and re-read the Transfiguration story this year is that there are times that we cannot see Jesus. There are times that Jesus is hidden from our view. We have been baptized, we worship, we know all about Jesus’ power, and maybe sometimes we have felt God move in our lives in a special way. But then there are times that God seems distant, our prayers appear to go unanswered, and we struggle with our faith. The Transfiguration event reminds us that Jesus is there for us even when it seems that he’s not. We are never alone. We might not always get the healing we desire or the miracle we want in this life, but we too will behold

the glory of Jesus one day. Jesus doesn't give us the power to end war, or fix the economy, or cure all disease with a word. But he does give us the strength and the faith to endure them and to be witnesses for him, despite our pains and troubles.

Lent begins this Wednesday, Ash Wednesday. In Lent our gospel readings will give us a better appreciation of the opposition and trials Jesus faced, opposition that led to his death on the cross. Their vision of Jesus' transfigured glory must have given some consolation and hope to Peter, John and James as they observed Jesus' rejection and humiliation in Jerusalem on the way to his death. Our experiences of Christ's glory can also serve to preserve our faith in tough times.

In the end, it's all about Jesus. The three disciples saw Jesus only after the vision had passed. St. Paul reminded the Corinthians that Christians don't proclaim themselves, they proclaim Christ. It's all about Jesus, and not so much about us. There was a book a while back called, "Tough Times Don't Last; Tough People Do." I'd like to put a little bit different spin on that and say, "Tough times may or may not last, but we have an even tougher Savior. He blesses us with the grace to persevere in faith through war, recession, disease, and any adversity." All will be well. Trust in him. Amen.

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