Today we heard the story of the transfiguration. Each year we hear this story twice: once on the Feast of the Transfiguration, in the summer, and then again on the Eve of Lent. The story of the transfiguration of Christ, found in the gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke, is a story that reveals Jesus divinity as he radiates God’s glory.

On this last Sunday of Epiphany, we are offered this picture of Jesus’s glory, with his divinity revealed, right before the upcoming Lenten season that points to Jesus’ vulnerability, with his humanity on full display. The gift of the transfigured Christ is that it serves as a lens through which we can look into Lent. For the picture of Jesus in glory transfigured is the photo negative of the picture of Jesus in vulnerability, hanging from the cross. To see the fullness of Christ is to see both the transfigured Christ and the crucified Christ. They are inseparable.

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According to Luke, just eight days before the transfiguration, Jesus’ disciples gather to pray. He does so after a flurry of activity: proclaiming the good news, commissioning his disciples, and performing a slew of miracles (including the feeding of the five thousand). After all this breathtaking activity, Jesus retreats with his disciples to pray. In the context of prayer, Jesus asks his followers that question which resounds to the present: “Who do you say that I am?”

Peter is the only disciple to answer correctly: “You are the Messiah.” But instead of the chest-thumping triumphalism we might expect in reply, Jesus uses this moment of insight into his messiahship to break the news of his imminent death. Change is afoot. The story suddenly, decisively shifts on to Jerusalem—where Jesus will enter in triumphal pomp, only to be summarily executed as a common criminal (the so-called “King of the Jews”).

And right here, at that turning point toward Jerusalem, is where we pick up the story today. To further process this news of what is to come and to rest for the journey ahead, Jesus takes three disciples up to the mountaintop to retreat and pray.

Up on the mountaintop Peter, James, and John begin to pray with Jesus. Jesus is transfigured. Words fail at that point, but Luke’s gospel says: “his face changed, and his clothes became dazzling white.” Like Moses’ face that shined on Mt. Sinai, Jesus’ entire being shines with surpassing splendor. Jesus’ body undergoes a metamorphosis, which is one translation of the Greek. There before his disciples, he is changed into something beyond, across its original state. He is at once completely familiar and completely unfamiliar; and so shall he be in his resurrection, which this transfiguration moment prefigures with a fleeting glimpse.

Moses and Elijah appear, seemingly out of nowhere. But situated next to these two prophets, Jesus seems clearly to be the long-awaited fulfillment of God’s promise—the Messiah, as these two witnesses attest, fulfilling the Torah. The gospel writer’s Jewish audience would have recognized the significance of Moses and Elijah. Jesus is the fulfillment of God’s law, given by Moses. Elijah’s presence is equally important. According to the prophesy by Malachi, Elijah’s second coming foretold the coming of the Messiah. Hence Peter recognized the moment by suggesting they build three dwellings. He knew this was an unparalleled moment in human history. And as a good Jew, he wanted make a home for God’s presence.

Then God’s voice came from a cloud, just as God’s presence had been made known to Israel in a cloud so many times before (on Mt. Sinai, as the Law was delivered to Moses; that pillar which led Israel through the wilderness; that cloud which descended into the Tabernacle around the Ark of the Covenant). If there was any doubt about this moment, the suspicions are confirmed as God proclaims: “This is my Son, my chosen; listen to him!”
And almost as soon as this mountaintop experience began—the cloud, Elijah, Moses, and the voice from heaven—it is over, done. The disciples are suddenly alone with Jesus, as they prepare to descend down the mountaintop towards Jerusalem: the place where Jesus will hang on the cross.

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On this last Sunday of Epiphany, on the eve of Lent, we are confronted with these two pictures of Jesus. We see a picture of transfigured Christ, full of glory as the Son of God; and we are painfully aware of what is to come: that picture of the crucified Christ, full of vulnerability. The image of the transfigured Christ on a hilltop is the photo negative of the crucified Christ on a hilltop to come.

At the transfiguration, three disciples are as close as they can get to Jesus’ glory; at the cross, three followers witness his crucifixion from afar.

At the transfiguration, Peter’s clearly sees Jesus’ identity; while at the cross, Peter denies ever knowing him.

At the transfiguration, God’s presence is revealed in a bright cloud; while at the cross, cloud cover renders the sky dark as night.

At the transfiguration, God claims Jesus as his own son; while at the cross, Jesus calls out to a seemingly-silent Father: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”

To see Jesus transfigured is to see Jesus crucified. We must see both: his divinity and his humanity, his glory and his vulnerability. For in so doing we gain greater picture into the power of the good news that Jesus is proclaiming. A picture of seeming paradoxes that we see again and again through life.

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A few years ago, I brought Holy Communion to a parishioner named Letti in her late-nineties. I visited with her and her family that she lived with. During out visit, I learned about a recent fall that she suffered; her painstakingly slow recovery. In her late nineties, like all bodies, hers was taking longer to recover.

When the visit was over, I headed towards the door and noticed a piano. I asked, “Who plays?” The son-in-law said that Letti played. He asked if I wanted to stay and hear her play a song, and I said, “Of course!” Slowly she got up from her chair and used her walker to make her way to the piano bench. When she got to the bench she slowly lowered herself down. She placed her age-worn fingers on the keys, looked at the music, and without wasting a millisecond started playing.

She played with such vigor and passion, I thought I was seeing a different person. Her entire being glowed, she was thoroughly changed, she was transfigured, as she played the piano. After a rousing finish and a hearty applause, the woman stood up, smiled through her eyes, and said, “Come again!”

In this moment, I saw the cross and the transfiguration. I saw God’s glory, which, as Saint Irenaeus said, is the human being fully alive. I also saw vulnerability and frailty, the human condition exposed fully on the cross.

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As we prepare to travel through Lent, may we hold onto these two images of Jesus. The photo negative of the transfiguration that prefigures the resurrected Christ, curbing our pessimism and nihilism as we journey to the cross. And the picture of the cross, where Christ died to conquer death and was vanquished to reign as King.

As we journey into Lent, may we hold onto both of these pictures of Jesus. May we see God in glory and vulnerability. May we even see God, in our own lives and in the lives of those we love—in glory and frailty, brokenness and beauty. For to fully see Jesus, is to see both. Amen.