

# SAINT THOMAS CHURCH

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*Fifth Avenue · New York City*

**Sunday, August 7, 2022**

Celebration of the Transfiguration of our Lord

**Solemn Eucharist**

11 a.m.

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A Sermon by

The Reverend Prisca Lee-Pae, *Associate for Pan-Asian Ministry*

*on*

Exodus 34:29-35; 2 Peter 1:13-21; Luke 9:28-36

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## **Speaking of death in a dazzling Transfiguration**

I had my first vacation since I began working here and it's great to see you this morning. This is my first Sunday back and boy, I have a tough passage to preach today. The Transfiguration of Jesus. One of the major feasts of the church calendar.

The transfiguration of Jesus is recorded in all three Gospels. Matthew and Mark speak very similarly about the transfiguration of Jesus, whereas Luke we heard this morning offers a different version and I want to explore some of the distinctive features of Luke's version.

Luke begins the story of the transfiguration with the intention of establishing a tighter connection with Jesus' prediction about his death and resurrection, and with the message that suffering is the way to glory. Another important difference is that only Luke provides the content of the conversation among Jesus, Moses and Elijah. Jesus' death, his departure was the topic of the conversation. The Greek word for "departure" is *exodos*. Moses and Elijah see the real and perfect Exodus in the passion and resurrection. They appeared in glory and were speaking of the death of Jesus which he should accomplish at Jerusalem. The law and the prophets testifying to Jesus' suffering, death, and resurrection is an important theme in Luke.

What does it imply for us that what the Messiah, the Savior, the Son of God who came to this earth was trying to accomplish was death?

What am I, we, and the church trying to accomplish? No matter how much challenging one we try to think of, we would not think about death as something to accomplish. But we know well what Jesus said after his first prediction of his suffering and death.

"If any wish to come after me, let them deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will save it."

Jesus is our true Teacher who lived as He taught. But every time or most of time, we and the church fail to deny ourselves and are terrified of losing our lives. Yet still we try to teach the world what we cannot do. If Christianity is shrinking in modern society and the church seems to be dying, it is probably because of this. "The church that wants to save its life will lose it, and the church that loses its life for Jesus' sake will save it."

In this era when Christianity is fading away, what our church should be struggling with is not how to survive, but how to accomplish death, death that Jesus wanted to achieve at Jerusalem. It seems clear that for Jesus to accomplish death was not an easy task. He often went up to the mountain to pray alone or with his

disciples as in today's Gospel. It is impossible to accomplish death without prayer. When we pray, we can achieve what we cannot achieve with our own strength. And we can only pray when we are aware that there are things we cannot accomplish on our own. We know how often the Gospel says that Jesus went to a secluded place or went up the mountain to pray. How often do we come before God?

The key message that Luke is trying to convey through Transfiguration of Jesus is this. "Listen to him." Although Peter, John, and James, who had gone up with Jesus, fell asleep, and Peter said something silly to build three tents and live together with Moses and Elijah, and he did not know what he was talking about, they could hear the voice of heaven, because they were with Jesus on the mountain where he prayed. Even if we doze off like his disciples and do not quite understand what is going on, the Lord makes us hear the voice of Heaven when we are in the place of prayer with Jesus.

What do we hear in our daily life? Whether we like it or not, we are always exposed to the voice of the world that we need more things and better stuff to be happy. Even when the TV is turned off, it whispers into our ears in the palm of our hands until we fall asleep.

In fact, in the glorious transfiguration of Jesus, conversations with Moses and Elijah, and all these mysteries disappearing into the clouds, Peter, John, and James are not bystanders who just slept, babbled, bewildered, and confused. God never left them as a third party. As if all the mysteries were for them, God speaks directly to them. "Did you see it? This is my beloved Son. Listen to him." And now two thousand years later we are listening to this story like a third person, but the voice that Peter, John, and James heard is for us and they are there to testify it to us.

It may be easy to live with, being more influenced by the voice of the world than His words. More honestly speaking, we may just not want to hear God.

'Deny yourself and take up your cross daily and follow me.' 'The least among all of you is the greatest.' 'No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends.'

Jesus' words are never meant to ease the hearts of those who hear them. And our savior, the Messiah, does not flauntingly overthrow the powers of the world, but instead chooses the path of suffering that is ridiculed by them, and ultimately sets up death, the final point of failure and setback, as something to accomplish. He did this in order to show that the glory of God is completely different from the glory of the world.

What does it mean that Jesus spoke of his death in a dazzling transfiguration? It means that the death he was trying to achieve was not death for destruction, death that leads to extinction but death for love, death that leads to the glorious resurrection. This is why we should see death as something the church should not fear but something we strive to achieve.

We, the church, exist for the glory of God. We, the church, are to shine for the glory of God, not for the glory of the world. It is God's glory alone that must be revealed through us.

I believe the Lord will make us shine when we, the church embrace death for love.

I would like to leave you with this poem THE LIGHT WE'VE BEGUN TO KNOW by Andrew King.

We think we know light's movements –  
the way sun's rays can play across  
the surface of the water, the way  
it falls from candle flame, or  
softly sifts through leaves to lift  
the petals on their stems, opening up  
each blossom like a blessing.

We think we know light's gradients –  
the way it can take the shade of rain  
or break into the colours of the rainbow;

the way it burns a hole in blue  
from the blazing summer sun;  
or reddens clouds before it gives  
night's gift of stars and moon.

We think we know light's stories –  
like the glow that shone from Moses' skin  
as he brought the law in stone down  
from the mountain; or the brilliance  
of the fire of the chariot and riders  
that swept to heaven the prophet named Elijah.

But today the light we thought we knew  
has taken on new radiance, has made  
an unexpected move, is telling a new story;  
it dazzles the eyes but more our hearts,  
for this is the light embodied: this  
is the light of the knowledge of God  
that shines in the face of Jesus.

Nor is this the final story  
that the light in Christ will tell:  
the veil that is lifted so briefly  
upon his unseen glory drops again;  
the tale to remain untold  
until his rising from the dead – when  
the light we've begun to know  
makes its home in the church,  
to reveal his glory in us,  
and transfigured will be me and you.