

**Last Sunday after Epiphany
St. David's - February 3, 2008
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It was the last day. So there we sat, my grandmother and I, in our favorite place in the world, Memorial Stadium in Baltimore. As usual, our beloved team was in last place. But we were there anyway on this, the last game of the season. It would prove to be one of the best days of my life. Yes, the Orioles won that day, but that had little to do with what happened to me that afternoon. Having the opportunity to be with my grandmother one-on-one for an entire afternoon changed me deep inside. My grandmother had already taught me how to experience God in my daily life. It was my grandmother who proved to me beyond a shadow of a doubt that God was with me in a real and personal way. It was with my grandmother that I had my first experience of transfiguration, of God becoming so real and vivid to me that it felt like I was going to burst. It was my grandmother that made it possible for me to read today's Gospel and understand exactly how Peter, James and John felt at that exquisite moment when they saw Jesus in a totally new light.

But on this afternoon, it was my grandmom who taught me that

sport was so much more than wins or losses. By being there for our last place team on the last day of the season, my grandmom taught me about the morality of baseball. We were not just spectators, she told me, but we were connected to the players on the field in a real way, similar to our connection to God. “This is what community is all about,” she taught me. “We become bonded with the people around us because we have a common mission. And because of that, all of us become better people, more than we are by ourselves. Watching baseball,” she taught me, “can be just as sacred as going to church. It too, can link us to God in our daily life. And then, every so often,” she said, you will feel that connection in a special way.” And as if to prove her point, my grandmom and I made friends with nearly everyone in our section that day and we watched amazed as our players seemed to be feeding off our energy. A very average outfielder named Jackie Brandt made an unbelievable catch. A pitcher hit a home run. After the game was over, the Oriole players came back on the field and said thanks to all of us. And for just a fleeting moment, I felt a tiny fraction of what the kingdom of God is all about. It was a tiny transfiguration moment for me, in of all places, a sports arena. “God”, my grandmom said, can

be experienced anywhere. You just need to connect yourself.”

The warm summer and the light of that epiphany was quickly enveloped in the darkness of a Maryland winter. And it was suddenly cold. It was so... cold. The wind whipped through my skinny little body so strongly that I could feel it freezing the marrow inside my bones. People complain about the humidity in the eastern United States in the summer. But it is the winter that always got me. There is nothing colder than arctic air filled with moisture.

That winter air was always enough to set me off into a round of depression. But this air was different. It was, in fact, the coldest I had ever felt in my life. That is because my body was devoid of the ability to fend off the slightest irritation. I was nothing more than an empty shell as I walked out of the hospital that night where my grandmother had just died. I wanted to just crawl up in a fetal position and wait, forever if necessary, for it all to go away.

The next few days were easily the most painful ones I had experienced in my young life. It felt like everything my grandmother had taught me was ripped right out of my body. In the midst of the cold and pain of that time, I could feel nothing. I went to church that

Sunday and prayed and prayed and waited. But I still felt no presence, no light, no nothing. I felt like the story I had seen in Time magazine just a few months earlier had it exactly right. God was dead.

It just so happened that that Sunday was this Sunday, Super Bowl Sunday. Our team, my grandmother's team, the Baltimore Colts, were suiting up for Super Bowl III against the New York Jets. Three days earlier, the game seemed like a major event in my life. But now, after the death of my grandmother, I could not have cared less. I got home from church and locked myself in my room.

My mom knocked on the door. "It's time for the game," she said. Through my sobbing I finally blurted out, "I can't mom. I just can't watch." My mom responded, "You know what your grandmother would say. She would not want you to miss this game." "But mom, it's wrong. I can't watch a stupid game when my grandmother is dead. It's just not right." "Now Steve, you know your grandmother would drag you down in the basement to see it. Let's go. Besides, it will cheer us up a bit before we go to the funeral home."

Well, that logic seemed incontrovertible. The Colts, after all, were favored even more heavily than the New England Patriots are

today. They were 19 point favorites against the New York Jets, some quasi team playing in some rinky-dink thing called the American Football League. So off to the basement we went to watch the big game. For those of you unfamiliar with football historical data, Super Bowl III would result in the largest upset ever in the history of the game. The Colts would lose to the Jets that day 16-7, causing that rinky-dink league to merge with the National Football League. Near the end of the game, our beloved blue collar hero, Johnny Unitas, would fall to the turf in utter despondence and go into a fetal position himself. It was the perfect symbol. My family sat there with Johnny in a catatonic state, unable to speak or move. Finally my dad said, we have to get to the funeral home. When we walked back outside, it was so cold. The coldest I have ever been. Perhaps I thought, perhaps I could just crawl into that coffin with my grandmom.

Fast forward. It is the last day of September, the exact same day that my grandmother and I had sat together in Memorial Stadium 15 years earlier. I am sitting in the same place with 25,000 other people. The season is longer than it was that year my grandmother and I went together. So this is not the last game of the year, but the last series.

Three more games would follow this one. In addition, the Orioles are not in last place, but second. They are three games behind the first place Milwaukee Brewers...with four games to play. And just as if scripted in a Barry Levinson movie, it was those same Milwaukee Brewers who would be the Orioles opponent. The only way the Birds could win the division and go to the championship would be to sweep the four game series, a virtual impossibility. As that first game progressed, I felt something happening around me. Everything seemed lighter and brighter than normal. By the 7th inning, it is obvious that the players too could feel something. I suddenly flash back to that afternoon with my grandmom those many years before and I wonder, could it be? The Orioles win that night in an impressive performance. The next game I am back again, and there are many more people in the stadium. By the third inning, I feel an electricity running through the place like I have never felt in my life. Suddenly, we are all talking to each other like we have been friends our entire lives. I watch as Ken Singleton reaches over the fence to catch a sure home run. We go crazy when Rick Dempsey rings a double into the left field corner to score the go ahead run. And as the game ends, we know that we are

experiencing something special.

Saturday afternoon comes and now the stadium is nearly full. I feel like I am at church with 50,000 of my closest friends. This is no longer just baseball, but it has become a sacred experience, just as my grandmother had taught me. Players were feeding off our energy and there was something going on inside of me that was just as profound as experiences of God I had with my grandmother. We watch dumbfounded as the Orioles completely shut down the Brewers. There we were, in a flatfooted tie with the Brewers heading into the final game of the season.

Sunday dawned and the sky was deep blue, something you rarely see in any east coast town. The same electricity that filled the ballpark filled our church that morning. In fact, it was everywhere in the whole city. I have never felt so connected to so many people in my life. Once we arrived at the stadium, the sensation was so strong, we could barely stay seated. Every seat was filled, people were standing in the aisles. Every moment was so palpably saturated with drama that the field seemed too green and the sun too bright. On the field, the Brewers jumped to an early lead off of Jim Palmer. It got worse

and by the fifth inning, Palmer was gone. The Orioles were down by five runs and by the seventh inning, it became apparent that no miracle was going to happen that day. The game ended and the Orioles had been soundly defeated. So there I sat, once again, unable to move. But this was so different than the catatonic stupor that my family sat in on that horrible Super Bowl Sunday 15 years earlier. I was not cold at all, but strangely warmed. In fact, to my utter surprise, a sense of euphoria was running through my body. I knew that my grandma was right there with me. I could feel her presence as strongly as I could my own hands. I sat there in that old stadium and began crying as the warmth of Grandma's lessons overpowered me and she connected me even more directly with God than she had when she was alive.

When I finally had the courage to look up even though I was still balling, I was astonished. I found that I was not alone. Everyone who was sitting around me was still there. Everyone in the entire section was still there. I looked around the stadium and could not detect that a single person had left, though the game was long over. Even more astonishing, those people were crying just like me. They were also laughing and clapping and hugging each other. All of us had just

experienced together an unbelievable moment of transfiguration. Our team had just suffered an incredibly heartbreaking loss but we were basking in the most emotionally satisfying moment of our lives. The game was over for 15, 30, then 45 minutes and we were all still there. The players were so astounded that they came back on the field in all states of undress. They bowed to us, they waved to us. I watched hard core Earl Weaver start crying too and we just kept applauding. We hugged each other again and cried more tears of joy. Later I would learn that Howard Cosell was on television describing this moment to a national audience. He called it the most profound moment he had ever experienced in his long history of covering sports. “Never have I ever seen anything like this.”

It may sound downright silly to many of you to compare this moment with the transfigurations in both our Hebrew and Gospel readings today. Many of you may consider sport to be the bane of 21st century culture and in many ways you are right. But I have to tell you, at that moment I experienced what I believe to be the kingdom of God. It was at that moment that I realized that it is when we create a community of love, a beloved community that supports one another in

wins and losses, in pain and in exuberance, on top of the mountain or at the foot of the cross, that we see the shining radiance of God right here on earth.

The next year, the Orioles won the World Series. And I will remain convinced to the day I die that the team rode the wave of emotion we experienced together those last four games of the season the year before all the way to October. Winning was so sweet, but I also have to tell you, it could not compare with losing, with that moment in time when all of us were transfigured.

The message that I wish you to take home today is not that you will discover God if you become a baseball fan. The lesson is the one that my grandmother taught me so well. Never prejudge any situation. Experiencing the divine can happen anywhere at any time. By treating each step of our lives as sacred ones, by honoring the dignity of every aspect of our lives, any situation can turn into a transfiguration for us, even at a silly baseball game. Treat every scene of your life with respect and God will be there.

The other critical message that my grandmother taught me was that no matter how respectful we treat each aspect of our lives, these

special moments, these Cecille B. Demille experiences of God in our lives, can only be fleeting. Like the experience of the dazzling Christ by the disciples today, my experience of God's overpowering love was so brief. Each of us can have no more than the briefest glimpse of God's overwhelmingness while we are here on earth. Each of us, like Peter, may be tempted to bask in the glory of that moment forever. But we must remember that transfiguration always happens in the middle of the story. It happened in the middle of the Gospel and it happens in the middle of our lives. Transfiguration is not what we are striving for, but rather the experience that helps us live our lives as God intends. Transfiguration is not the goal, but the pointer towards the goal. It points us in the right direction in our lives and gives us strength for the journey.

That is why the prosperity Gospel of preachers like Joel Osteen is so unbiblical. The transfiguration, as described so eloquently in our Gospel today, makes it clear that we must never attempt to live our lives in constant ecstasy as Osteen suggests. That is what Jesus makes clear to Peter today and what we must always remember. An ecstatic experience of God is something to fall back on to give us

strength and to remind us of what God calls us to do. To constantly stay in the light of Epiphany is to live the life of addiction. Instead, we are called to come down off the mountain, to leave the field of dreams.

That is why the season of Epiphany ends and the time of Lent begins. May each of us enter that season unafraid of the cold days that loom before us. Let us not be afraid because we have learned through transfiguration that Lent is not a solitary journey, but one we take together. It is in that community journey that each of us will experience the cold of winter melting away and the warmth of God's presence enveloping each of us. Thanks Grandma for warming that way for all of us. Amen.