

Feast of the Transfiguration 2023

The Feast of the Transfiguration is one of only three feasts that, when they land on a Sunday, take precedence over the regular Sunday worship.

The other two are the Feast of the Holy Name and the Feast of the Presentation, when Jesus was first presented at the temple.

Simply put, if one of these three feasts falls on a Sunday, we celebrate it on that day.

When these three feasts fall on other days, we are not allowed to transfer them to Sunday, but must celebrate them on the day on which they fall.

There are only two feasts that we are allowed to transfer to the following Sunday: All Saints and the feast of a specific church's patron or title (except during Advent, Lent, and Easter).

Because St. James Day does not occur during one of these three seasons, we are allowed to transfer it to the following Sunday, as we did last week, and it was a joyful creation of the kingdom of heaven.

By the way, transferring a feast is not to be confused with a movable feast, which is a term that refers to days like Easter and Pentecost that occur on different days each year.

Now that you know everything about when to celebrate feast days, we can go back to the transfiguration.

First of all, what was Jesus doing on a mountaintop chatting with Moses and Elijah about his coming crucifixion and departure, about which he had just spoken with his disciples?

The presence of Moses and Elijah is generally taken to mean that the law and the prophets are in support of Jesus' ministry and his departure.

Their appearance is assuring us, in other words, that Jesus is the fulfillment of the Jewish law and prophecies, and that the coming events, though unpleasant, will not undermine God's purpose.

Where others see failure, we Christians see resurrection.

Perhaps even stranger than a chat with two dead patriarchs is Peter's proposal to build three dwellings, one for Jesus, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.

You see, Peter, as usual, is doing that thing that many of us do.

He wants to stay on the mountaintop, from which he has a stress-free view of the world and all the people beneath.

The disciples seem to think that, once one gets it right, one can stop, freeze time, but Jesus knows that, though we may experience these transcendent moments, we cannot stay on the mountaintop.

It is good to go up, get the lay of the land, scout out the road ahead, but in the end, we must walk our paths, experience the trials, be in relationship with all those down

below, and allow our experiences to grow us so that the great consciousness grows with us.

Life is like a ropes course.

Getting it right is about how we go through it.

The point is to work together.

I recently watched a film, *Happiness for Beginners*, in which a group of mostly strangers are led by a young trail guide on a beginners' survivalist course along part of the Appalachian Trail in Connecticut and New York.

To the trail guide's frustration, one guy, Mason, consistently races ahead of the others.

When a person gets injured, the trail guide says that it is the fault of the person injured for not following directions and the fault of Mason for racing ahead and putting pressure on all those behind.

At one point, the trail guide divides the group in half, faster people in one half, slower people in the other.

He gives the slower group a thirty-minute head start, except he forces Mason to join the slower group.

He admonishes, "You *will* learn teamwork."

This sounds like Jesus when he tells his disciples that they will not lord it over others, but will humbly serve one another.

Jesus says goodbye to Moses and Elijah and goes back down the mountain.

In doing so, he shows us how we are to go through life's journey—not racing ahead, not looking down from above, but in relationship with others.

Researchers are finding repeatedly that he was right—having a spiritual life increases well being.

In a study done at Harvard, which is described as “the most rigorous and comprehensive systematic analysis of the modern day literature regarding health and spirituality to date,”¹ they found that, “for healthy people, spiritual community participation — as exemplified by religious service attendance — is associated with healthier lives, including greater longevity, less depression and suicide, and less substance use.”²

We see that, “having a spiritual life” does not mean some airy fairy decorating with dream catchers and crystals, but a commitment to a community and to a God who has been revealed to us.

Despite their specifying “religious service *attendance*,” I feel like the researchers I read nevertheless viewed spirituality as some kind of nice add-on, like vitamins or yoga or a daily affirmation, all of which may be very good, but having a

1 <https://news.harvard.edu/gazette/story/2022/07/spirituality-linked-with-better-health-outcomes-patient-care/>

2 <https://news.harvard.edu/gazette/story/2022/07/spirituality-linked-with-better-health-outcomes-patient-care/>. See also <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/0193945912448315> and <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC8651234/>

relationship with God and our brothers and sisters is more than an add-on that makes us feel good.

It is a fundamentally different way of being.

We build and maintain relationships that allow us to work together, to work in harmony not just with a few others, but with the sacred organism that is the cosmos.

We are fulfilling our purpose here on earth.

In the film, people on the hiking trip get a glimpse of this because they are forced to work together to survive, but they do not really know what to make of it, how to incorporate this awareness into their daily existence.

One woman on the hike who is studying happiness encourages the protagonist to end each day by thinking of three good things that occurred since arising.

This is a wonderful practice, but without the context of meaningful relationships, it falls flat.

I can imagine, for example, someone sounding like the pharisee who looked down on the confessing sinner: “I am so grateful, God, that I am better than others.”

When we prioritize anything over relationships, we suffer in the long run.

Our society has, for example, made money the primary goal of our healthcare system.

It determines how much time a doctor spends with her patients, what tests can be run, what treatments are available to specific persons.

As a result, our outcomes are statistically poorer than in other advanced nations and doctors and nurses are now experiencing “moral distress,” a term formerly applied to those who had fought in war.

It is now being used “to describe the feelings of guilt, sadness and defeat felt by health care professionals when [they] know what patients need but can't provide it.”³

One young doctor writes of convincing an uninsured patient with abdominal pain to go to the emergency room because, without proper testing, many fatal possibilities could not be ruled out.

He struggled with this advice because the cost to the patient could be more than he made in a year, and the illness might be insignificant.

Cases like this drove the doctor from practice.

When a society or an individual values anything higher than God and our brothers and sisters, we end up suffering for it.

Some people, of course, will find escapes.

We take drugs, buy a new toy, read a self help book, yet never figure out why we are feeling so empty.

We offer right here at St. James the very thing that makes the most difference in life, and we offer it together, which is the only way it can be offered, really.

We are a team on a beautiful journey together.

3 <https://www.npr.org/sections/health-shots/2023/08/02/1191446579/doctors-have-their-own-diagnosis-moral-distress-from-an-inhumane-health-system>

The simple key that no self-help book will tell you is: when we give anything precedence over people and God, we suffer spiritually and physically.

In fact, we end up for all intents and purposes alone.

You know, “Rosebud.”

This is true even when religious dogma comes between us and others, between us and God.

When it keeps us from loving God and our neighbors, we must set aside the dogma as Jesus did repeatedly.

Jesus told us that they will know my followers by how they love one another, nothing more, nothing less, not by how they follow the rules or have the right theology or are from the right tribe.

That is what we offer *here*, the most meaningful thing of all, the only meaningful thing, really.

We are imperfect people working together to bring about the kingdom right here among us.

Our imperfections are not the problem, but are merely the flip side of the gifts we have to share with others.

Religion is about connection with others and God.

When we pray, we celebrate that connection with the sacred organism.

Here we are, learning about it, doing it.

We are building the kingdom of heaven right here, relationship by relationship, and the positive effects ripple through the cosmos.

This is why we have been making changes to the church.

We have been organizing the space so that it is easy to use in support of our goals.

We have been clarifying our bylaws so that we can function with greater clarity.

We are revitalizing the campus so that it will be more user friendly, more visible, and more inviting to the community.

We want a sacred space that announces clearly its purpose and its relationship to the people around us.

We want people to know that we are here, to know what we do here, that we are a community of imperfect people growing together and ready to receive them in the bonds of Christian love.