

2nd SUNDAY OF LENT – A (March 5, 2023)

I'd like to begin with what I call "A Tale of Two Fortune Cookies" (how's that for an attention-grabber?). I like to do Chinese every once in a while, and about 2-3 months ago I was at a place in Mason City. I finished my meal, opened up the cookie, and the message was "Your charm is irresistible". Well, I almost laughed out loud and thought "man, am I ever going to have fun with this!" So, of course, I had to tell my brother Tom about it—just to remind him, if he forgot, of my 'irresistible' charm. Funny thing...he didn't seem overly impressed.

Fortune Cookie #2: last Sunday I went to Charles City after the last Mass to get a few groceries and I got some Chinese at Hy-Vee. This time my fortune said: "Focus on your long-term goal"—nowhere near as funny as my 'irresistible charm', that's for sure. We know that normally these 'fortunes' are so broad and generic as to be almost meaningless. But this particular one has some special relevance for us, especially in this season of Lent, and even more especially on this second Sunday of Lent.

Every year on this second Lenten Sunday we hear an account of Jesus' transfiguration into his godly glory. And it had to be a most amazing sight—Peter, James and John were stunned, frightened, and overwhelmed by this manifestation of his divinity. So why do we hear about this event in Lent? This divine glory of Christ, after all, doesn't sound anything at all like his forty-days fast and being tempted by the devil in the desert that we heard about last Sunday, does it?

But there is in fact a method to what is going on here. Just a few days prior to Jesus' transfiguration, he had told the apostles that he would have to suffer and die and rise from the dead after three days. Peter, who had just professed his belief that Jesus is 'the Christ, the Son of the living God', couldn't handle what Jesus foretold about himself and even tried to talk him out of having to go through that suffering. Jesus sternly corrected Peter: "Get behind me, Satan!...You are thinking not as God does, but as human beings do" (Matt. 16:23).

Back now to today's gospel where, as the Catechism puts it, "for a moment Jesus discloses his divine glory" (n. 555) in his transfiguration. This had to be a great consolation for Peter, James and John—at least for the moment—because this divine glory would in fact prevail over the suffering and death that Jesus would soon undergo. I say 'at least for the moment' because we remember that once Jesus was arrested in the garden after the Last Supper, Peter, James and John all ran away in fear and Peter even went so far as to deny three times to others that he even knew Jesus.

We return to Fortune Cookie #2: "Focus on your long-term goal." In the midst of Jesus' suffering, the apostles forgot that long-term goal—that goal being Jesus' triumph over death and his invitation to us to share eternal life and joy with him in his kingdom. Once Peter, James and John and the other apostles received the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, however, that 'long-term goal'; was permanently and powerfully etched in their minds and hearts. Nothing, but nothing could stop them from preaching that wonderfully good news—not even the threat and the reality of cruel martyrdom which nearly all of them endured.

What is your long-term goal? We hear of folks striving for things like good health, financial stability, having a fulfilling career, having a happy married and family life. These are all good, of course, and worthy of our practical attention and concern. But we all know that sometimes, even despite our best efforts, we do not or cannot achieve those goals. Life can throw us a lot of curve balls and we can seem to strike out with frustrating regularity...which can then lead to anger and even despair and wondering “does it make any sense to strive for anything at all?”

And that is precisely where we most need to ‘focus on your long-term goal’—the one and ultimate goal that we all share and that God has prepared for us: eternal life and perfect joy with him in his kingdom. One spiritual writer said it well in describing Jesus’ transfiguration as ‘a vision of glory...interwoven with talk of suffering: two opposite but not opposing aspects of the one paschal mystery of Christ. Death and resurrection, the cross and glory’ (Father Gabriel, “Divine Intimacy, Vol. II). Notice he said ‘death/cross and resurrection/glory’, not ‘death/cross or resurrection/glory’—we can’t choose the glory only and leave the cross behind. Jesus didn’t avoid the cross on his way to glory, and neither can we. It’s both/and, not either/or.

Again, our earthly goals can be good and worthy, but we do not and cannot have any certainty of ever achieving any of them fully. By the power of Jesus’ suffering, death and resurrection, we are able to share in that one and only and most important long-term goal of all—no matter what obstacles, frustrations or fears we will have to endure in the meantime.

So let’s all ask the Holy Spirit to help us in this season of Lent to renew our desires and resolve to ‘focus on [our] long-term goal’—the only one that is ultimately and eternally important. You know, every once in a while you really can find something helpful in a fortune cookie...