

Christ Church, Georgetown
Sermon, Transfiguration, February 26, 2017
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I speak only to the greater glory of God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

One of the blessings and curses of going to seminary in Washington, DC is that you become the *de facto* tour guide for all your family who wants to come visit. When my father came to visit me here I wanted to find something memorable for us to do together so I decided to take him on a tour of the Naval Academy at Annapolis. He was a sailor during the Vietnam War and we have always shared a love for all things Navy. While we were on the tour I noticed a small plaque on the wall commemorating the most recent Naval winner of the Medal of Honor. So, I pointed it out to my father, and he said, to my surprise, that he knew the man and they had met personally while he was aboard ship. I found out that was the commander of my Father's airwing and they were stationed aboard the same Aircraft Carrier during the war.

Captivated by the connection with my father's experience in the navy, I went home and tried to find what information I could about this man whose memory seemed to pop into my life. The man was James Stockdale, a naval aviator who was shot down over North Vietnam and taken captive as a prisoner of war. As the senior officer amongst the various prisoners at the camp later known as the "Hanoi Hilton", Stockdale took charge of the resistance to the captors and the welfare of his fellow soldiers. After enduring massive pain and adversity at the hands of torturers, Stockdale, and many of his companions made it out of the camp alive after the war. When he was rescued, his shoulders had been dislocated, his leg shattered, and his back broken, but his spirit had not been daunted. He remained on active duty for 6 years after which included teaching at the Naval War College.

Later, a business consultant named James Collins went to Stockdale and asked how he had coped with the dire circumstances that he had encountered in the Vietnamese prison camp. Stockdale said: "This is a very important lesson. You must never confuse faith that you will prevail in the end, which you can never afford to lose, with the discipline to confront the most brutal facts of your current reality, whatever they might be." However, when he was asked who didn't make it out, he said: "Oh, that's easy, the optimists. Oh, they were the ones who said, 'We're going to be out by Christmas.' And Christmas would come, and Christmas would go. Then they'd say, 'We're going to be out by Easter.' And Easter would come, and Easter would go. And then Thanksgiving, and then it would be Christmas again. And they died of a broken heart." The need to be unfeignedly hopeful and assured that you will triumph in the end while accepting the real and often imposing challenges that lie ahead later became known as the "Stockdale paradox" in his honor.

It is this tug of war between hope and perseverance that confronts the disciples on the mountain as they see the face of Jesus shining white as snow before them. The glory of God is shown to the men who have been following Jesus throughout His difficult ministry and they finally believe that their trials are over. They want to build dwellings and settle down with the transfigured Jesus. They think that everything is going to be great from now on. What a relief it must have been for the apostles to see the one they left everything behind to follow, confirm their faith and show them that they made the right decision.

They could see that Christ possessed the real glory of God and that their hope was true and grounded and tangible. However, they had no idea what trials and difficulties that were still before them. Their hope was secure and victory assured; God would not leave them to suffer in despair. But dark and difficult times awaited them on the way to liberation from the prison of sin and death.

It is this same tension that we carry as we enter Lent and our own journey to Jerusalem. We have assurance and hope that Easter will come and that death does not have the final word. However, we cannot afford to be like the optimists who waited for their challenges to resolve themselves. God does not promise us an easy path or that our hope is the “get out of jail free card” for trial and hardship. Christ who today stands radiant in glory will soon be hoisted up on the cross of disgrace for the world to ridicule and shame. Nonetheless we must be careful not to get discouraged by the challenges that are put before us. We know that this shame and trial can never overcome our hope, for God Himself has said that this Man is truly His Beloved Son.

The same tensions that were faced by Stockdale in Hanoi and the disciples on Mount Tabor still confront Christians in the modern world. We lose our friends and family, we go through our own personal struggles, and it is difficult to avoid acknowledging the period of public conflict in which we currently live. It is not hard to get discouraged by the circumstances of our lives. But when we look at the cross, we see not only the tragedy but the hope that will bring us through it to the glory of the kingdom of God. The Christ who God declared to be the savior of the world in great glory, is the same Christ who had to suffer and die to accomplish His mission. We are promised nothing less and nothing more. As we begin our Lenten journey, let us keep both the hope and challenge of the cross before our eyes so that we may persevere until our day of victory.

Amen.