

Transfiguration Sunday

Sermon by The Rev. Dr. Gloria Hopewell

Texts: Exodus 34: 29-35 & Luke 9: 28-43a

We are poised this day at the end of the liturgical season of Epiphany. Epiphany, the time of light, of God being revealed—made known to us—through Jesus and his life on earth, began in great joy some weeks ago with wisemen from the East following a star, bringing gifts to a child in Bethlehem. It ends with today's gospel story of the most spectacular revelation of all, where for just a brief instant, there is a glimpse of God, a glimmer of who Jesus really is. The mountain top setting is dramatic, the sights and the sounds stunning. The dazzling appearance of Jesus as he prays; the appearance of Moses and Elijah, two of the greatest figures in all of Israel's faith; the over shadowing cloud; and the voice from on high—the same voice, virtually the same words heard at Jesus' baptism: "This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him." It is a most mystical moment.

Now not everyone likes this story—or likes celebrating the Transfiguration. Some find it too supernatural and other-worldly. But let us look at this glimpse of God's awesome power as a kind of corrective to the rational/logical way we often approach our faith in this time. You see, these days we tend to focus on the immanence of God, that God who is closer than our very breath, that God who walks beside us. And that is certainly an important way to understand God, rather than carrying images of a God who exists somewhere "up there" who is distant and separate from human life, leaving us to our own devices.

At the same time, thinking of God only as our friend and companion carries a danger. The danger of domesticating God, of making God in our image. We need, now and then, to be shocked or surprised into suspending our need for logic and reason and to allow ourselves to be awed by that God who is beyond human understanding. To allow meaning that may be veiled by the mists of reason to be revealed to us. To move below our eyebrows and let those parts of us that are not regulated by our intellect perceive and know God's power and glory.

It is also important to recognize the images and symbols that connect our Christian story to that earlier and defining story of Moses meeting God on Mount Sinai to receive the Ten Commandments complete with the brightening of Moses' face, the cloud, and the voice of God. I imagine it being a special day for Peter, James, and John when they went with Jesus to the mountain. A chance to get away with their friend and teacher, away from the multitudes seeking miracles and healing. Away, even from the other disciples. A chance to talk and ask questions in a more intimate setting, or even just to share each other's company. They had heard and seen much in recent days--much that was disturbing. Jesus had been telling them just a few days before about what was ahead for him--that he would have to suffer, be rejected, and die. That they, his disciples, must pick up their crosses and follow him. Maybe, this day, they hoped Jesus would give them

more comforting and encouraging news. But that is not what happened there on the mountain.

What they saw was a Jesus who was transfigured during his moments of prayer. It was probably not surprising to witness Jesus' special relationship with God. They knew he went off from time to time to a solitary place—to the wilderness or a mountain or a garden—to pray and commune with God. But that day, in addition to seeing Moses and Elijah, they heard for the first time God's voice saying, "This is my son the Beloved. Listen to him." This was a BIG DEAL, not just an everyday kind of incident. If ever there was a true mountain-top experience, this was it.

We might understand Peter's reaction—trying to put words to this astounding event, to take some concrete, sensible action by suggesting that he build three tents or tabernacles to honor Moses, Elijah and Jesus. Was it just something to say, something to fill in an awkward moment when he was too overwhelmed to make sense of what had happened? Was it an attempt to memorialize the moment? Or, maybe just prolong and preserve it. It would be easier to bask in the glow and in the mystery up there where they are in the presence of God, easier than going back down from the mountain top to deal with the realities of life. Down below where they would need to truly hear Jesus' hard message of the pain and suffering that was to come—and they would need to live out what that message meant.

Mountain-top experiences are like that sometimes. They can be very powerful, and our instincts might be to stay with them. Stay in the light and glory on the mountain top. It feels so good, so unlike the mundane valleys of our everyday lives. We, too, just want to stay there, embrace it, capture the moment, and avoid going back down to the valley. Who wouldn't? Or maybe we go down but just continue to live in the memory of the mountain top moment, memorializing it, freezing it—and ourselves. The trouble with mountain-top experiences is that they usually are calling us from one place to another. They call us to change or move us into paths that are unknown or scary. And the thing is, we do need to go down. That is where the living is. That is where we carry out our call as disciples.

If we were to read a bit farther in the gospel, we would know there were more multitudes, more poor souls in need of healing waiting at the foot of that mountain. First off, there was a young boy who was in the midst of a seizure—which, in those days, was believed to be possession by a demon, an unclean spirit.

In 1519, the painter Raphael was commissioned to create a painting of the Transfiguration. It is now part of the Vatican collection, though it moved around a bit with changes of power in Europe. Look at the front of your bulletin. The reproduction is small and black and white. But perhaps you can see it well enough to follow along. On the upper part of his canvas, Raphael painted Christ dressed in white and bathed in light, hands upraised in blessing. On one side of Christ is Moses. On the other side, Elijah. The three disciples are crouching on the ground shielding their eyes from the light. Raphael died before completing the painting. Later, some other artists were hired to

finish it. They worked on the bottom of the canvas, painting the scene of the possessed boy. Some in the crowd are pointing in distress at the boy. Others are pointing toward the mountain top.

The artists apparently had read the Scripture. They must have understood that what happened on the mountain top was related to what was happening with the people below. The artists even made the brightness that surrounded Jesus radiate down to the crowds. They understood that the Christ of the mountain top is with us in the valleys of our lives.

Peter, James, and John did leave the mountain top. They descended with Jesus and followed him through the hard stuff—not perfectly by any means—but they followed him. What they found was that in time, they did come to understand. And in the understanding they gained the strength and the faith and the courage they needed to carry on the ministry. God had been revealed to them. God had spoken, and even if they were overwhelmed and perplexed at the beginning, they continued moving forward even into the unknown and the frightening, trusting that understanding would come. And they found that God is not only present on the mountain top but in all of the joys and struggles of life. They were transformed.

Today, we have a choice. We can choose to stay with the rational. We can raise our eyebrows at this fantastic story and dismiss it as mythic and spiritualized. Or we can recognize that something startling and memorable happened on the mountain top that presented a whole new way of seeing. And we can look deeper for meaning.

This kind of thing happens all the time, all around us. Our revelations may not be so extraordinary. They may not even seem to be “mountain top” experiences. But we all do have moments when God is revealed to us. Whenever a light inside us is ignited and we see and understand in a new way, there is transfiguration. Most of the time, these revelations come out of very ordinary events or through ordinary people. They may be tiny glimpses, and if we are too caught up in the frenzy of living, we may not even notice. Or they may be things we do not recognize at the time but only in retrospect.

Have you gone to the top of a mountain or to the ocean to see a sunrise? Have you seen the scarlet of a cardinal against the dreary grayness of a winter’s day and heard its song? If we look very closely, we may even see a face transformed. Have you seen a new mother or father the first time they look at their newborn child?

The important thing is to show up. And to pay attention. Pay attention—and be fully present—to what happens to us each day, the people we meet, the beauty of nature around us, even the ugliness and destruction we may encounter. These may be ways that God is revealed to us.

Of course, the first thing we need is the boldness to walk up the mountain in the first place. The willingness to gaze into the brilliant light knowing that we will be changed. The courage to be open to moving out of the comfort zone and going deeper—even though we know it might demand more than we think we are willing to give. The will to

allow transformation to happen rather than safely filing an experience away, freezing it into the past as a memorial.

As Lent begins on Wednesday, I invite you to commit yourselves to devoting some time each day to being with God. Your prayer doesn't need to be fancy or profound. Just make a quiet time and place to be in God's presence. The goal is not to have a dramatic vision but to allow yourselves to cultivate a sense of the sacred within and to become more firmly rooted in God's love. Over time, we will be changed. Over time, our spiritual batteries will be recharged and the light will be ignited and burn more and more brightly. And then it is up to us to carry that light down the mountain and into the world.

Through the revelations that come in our living and in our praying, we learn that God is not only on the mountain top but in the midst of all life. We are not guaranteed comfort and safety or lives without doubt or failure or pain. But sometimes, when that pain is the greatest and the doubt seems overwhelming, we see the face of the newborn infant or the perfect sunrise and know God's presence at our side.

Amen and amen.