

Feast of the Transfiguration
Sunday, August 6, 2017
Trinity Episcopal Church – Bend, OR
The Rev. John Collins

I am sure when watching TV or listening to the radio, that we all have all experienced a voice seemingly coming out of nowhere to inform us that our regularly scheduled program was being interrupted for important news. Today is the Feast day of the Transfiguration. When it occurs on a Sunday it takes precedence. Ordinarily this would be the Ninth Sunday after Pentecost but it has been preempted, so to speak, by the Transfiguration. You also will note that the liturgical color for today is white since it is a feast day rather than the standard green for the season of Pentecost. More importantly, our readings for today do not continue our Pentecost journey through Genesis, Romans and Matthew. Rather the Old Testament reading you heard this morning is from Exodus, the Epistle from 2 Peter and the gospel from Luke. Suffice it to say, we can only conclude that the Transfiguration is a big deal. Well, yes it is. Having said that, however, what exactly are we to understand about it regarding our lives today some two thousand years later?

First of all, all four of the gospels have similar versions of the story of the Transfiguration. By comparison, there are only two accounts of the birth of our Lord, one in Matthew and the other in Luke that are significantly different in detail. Clearly when it came to the Transfiguration the writers of the gospels found the account to be compelling. In Luke's account, Jesus leads Peter, James and John up a mountain to pray. I wonder if Jesus knew what was going to happen? We can be certain the clueless and sleepy disciples didn't. Suddenly while Jesus was praying he was filled with a radiant light and the disciples "saw his glory." Moses and Elijah appear talking with Jesus, informing him of what is to transpire in Jerusalem and his exodus or departure as our translation tells us. Of course, Peter, as he was wont to do, proposes that they make three dwelling places—one for Moses, Elijah and Jesus—not truly understanding the meaning of what he has seen. I think this brings up an important question for us to contemplate; what was the purpose of the Transfiguration? It is after all a unique story in the gospel because the miracle happens **to** Jesus. But, for whose benefit was the event intended? Was it Jesus, or the disciples who witnessed it, or us? Perhaps it was all of the above.

Admittedly the story is a rather fantastic account. It has a Cecil B. DeMille quality to it—Charlton Heston, the ten plagues of Egypt, the parting of the Red Sea, etc., for those of us old of

enough to remember the 1956 movie *The Ten Commandments*. Or for those of you too young, think Spielberg's *Close Encounters of a Third Kind* or *Star Wars*. That said, Scripture seems to indicate to us that God has an affinity for mountaintops. In today's reading from Exodus, Moses climbs Mount Sinai to ultimately receive the Ten Commandments. There too, he encounters the glory of God. Like Peter, James and John, he came away transformed.

Today, there will be a lot of sermons preached about mountaintop experiences. I have preached one myself and will admittedly touch on that today as well. Two years ago this month I had the privilege officiating my great-niece's wedding in Aspen Colorado. Most of the invited guests came from either Dallas or Houston. Now, Dallas has an altitude of 430 feet while Houston sits at 35 feet, barely above swamp level. Aspen has an altitude of just under 8,000 feet, which is challenging enough for low-landers, but the bride and groom had chosen the top of Aspen mountain as the site for the ceremony. Talk about a mountain top experience! At 11,200 feet, conducting a wedding there is akin to doing so at the top of Mount Hood. In my homily that day I discussed mountaintop experiences, those rare transcendent events in our lives that come along rarely, as contrasted with our normal everyday lives on the plains. Of course, I reminded those in attendance that there would also be those times spent in the valleys and deserts of our lives and that our job was to support the couple in good times, ordinary times and even in the bad times.

All of us must come down from the mountaintops of our lives, just as Moses, Jesus, Peter, James and John did. Jesus knew what awaited him in Jerusalem. Moses would over the next forty years lead an unruly and resistant group of people to the Promised Land. Peter, James and John would go on with the other disciples to experience Jesus' death and resurrection and ultimately to see to it that Christ's message was spread far and wide. It is important to remember that the work of our lives and the work of the Church do not happen at the top of mountains.

In preparing my sermon today, I spent time contemplating the possible meanings that we might draw from the story of the Transfiguration, and there are a few. The author of 2 Peter shares with the reader Peter's recollection of the Transfiguration. He states that Peter knows that the end of his life is coming soon. Barbara Brown Taylor in an article that appeared in *Christian Century* offered an interesting observation about the Transfiguration that I find compelling. She said:

“To lead our exodus, Jesus had to die like we do: alone, with no particular glory. Otherwise he would have been an anomaly instead of a messiah, and it would have been hard for us to see what he had in common with the rest of us.

As it was, he died very much like those who died on either side of him, one of them begging to be saved from what was coming, the other asking to be remembered when Jesus got where he was going. Jesus could not do anything for the one who wanted to be spared, but he did a great favor for the other. He told him that the darkness was a dazzling one, with paradise in it for both of them.

I think it was something he learned on the mountain, when light burst through all his seams and showed him what he was made of. It was something he never forgot. If we have been allowed to intrude on that moment, it is because someone thought we might need a dose of glory too, to get us through the night. Some people are lucky enough to witness it for themselves, although like Peter, James and John, very few of them will talk about it later.

What the rest of us have are stories like this one, and the chance to decide for ourselves whether we will believe what they tell us. It is a lot to believe: that God's lit-up life includes death, that there is no way around it but only through, that even the darkness can dazzle.”

Jesus showed us that our journey ultimately must pass through a personal Calvary. What Moses, and the disciples discovered is that encounters with the Divine would leave them as changed human beings. The same is true for us. The closer we draw to Christ, the more we will reflect the glory of God back into a world that in many ways is shrouded in darkness. I would like to close with a story that speaks to the power the Transfiguration still holds for us today two thousand years later. Thomas G. Long, a professor at the Candler School of Theology at Emory University in Atlanta, in his book *Whispering the Lyrics*, recounts this story:

“When she called her minister to come to the hospital, she had just received the worst possible news from her physician. The cancer had returned with a vengeance, and there was nothing more that could be done. Her time was now a matter of weeks -- or days. When her minister arrived, she shared the sad news and made her request, ‘I want you and some

of the elders of the church to come here and, like the Book of James says, to pray for me and to anoint my head with oil.'

The minister, a Presbyterian and unaccustomed to the ritual of unction, was startled by this request. 'I'm not sure I can do this,' he hesitated. 'It seems more like magic than ministry.' She gripped his hand, 'No. I am going to die. I know I am going to die. The doctors have made that clear. I am never going to leave this hospital alive.'

'Then why do you want me to anoint you with oil?'

'Because it will be a sign that death is not the last word about me, a sign that I belong to Christ, a sign that in the power of God I am already healed.'

So, around her bedside gathered her minister and a few others from the church. Long ago, when she was an infant, another minister had prayed over her, laid his hand upon her head and said the ancient words, "I baptize you in the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost." Now, prayer was offered for her anew, hands were laid on her head again and the sign of the Holy Spirit was traced in oil upon her forehead. Here in the depths of her pain was a moment of transfiguration discernment. She -- and everyone else in the room -- remembered her baptism and glimpsed, even in the midst of her suffering, the glory of her resurrection."