
From: Pamela Shier

Subject: Trinity Transfiguration 2024

Today is the last Sunday of the Epiphany as we draw to a close the Advent/Christmas/Epiphany cycle of our church year. It is still the dark of winter, as our snow and groundhog attest, even as we move through the light of the Epiphany to its glorious crescendo - the Transfiguration. Transfiguration Sunday marks an in-between space -- between Epiphany, which began with the journey of the magi, and Lent, which begins Jesus' journey to the cross. Some call this a threshold time when we stand poised at an open door, perhaps reluctant to leave the warmth and familiarity of our comfort spaces but sensing a deep calling to take that step. It is time to turn away from the twinkling stars of Christmas toward the deep wilderness of Lent.

Several years ago, there was a public opinion poll did a survey about religion in America. They asked several thousand people whether they had ever had what they would call "a religious experience," a personal, spiritual experience that brought them somehow into the presence of God. The survey also asked several other questions, including whether the people went to church and what each person's denomination was.

Aren't you curious as to how Episcopalians fared in this poll? Were we at the bottom-of-the-barrel? No, we weren't last. In fact, we were at the very top of the mainline denominations. Somewhere between 70 and 80% of the Episcopalians surveyed said that they had had some sort of religious experience in which they encountered the presence of God in their lives. Wow, who knew? Well, exactly - perhaps no one knows because, like the disciples after the Transfiguration, we keep silent, telling no one of the things we have seen and experienced. That is why, during Lent at our Wednesday worship and suppers we will hear stories of faith by some of our fellow parishioners. I believe we will be truly astonished by God's presence and work in our everyday lives.

In my small West Virginia parish, I had a tradition of including a "little girl" in my sermons who asked questions of her grandfather. That little girl may have been me, she certainly spoke for many of us. Today, after hearing the Transfiguration story, our little girl is asking, "Grandpa, what really happened?"

Jesus left the nine other disciples and took Peter and James and John on a hike up Mount Tabor which you may remember as the prophet and judge Deborah's mountain. They climbed most of the afternoon and arrived towards evening. "On the mountain, Jesus bent in prayer erupts in sudden light. As glory leaks from every pore, three sleepy disciples cower in the grass and watch their Master glow. Two figures appear out of time and space; in solemn tones they speak of exodus, accomplishment, Jerusalem. The disciples, comprehending nothing, babble nonsense in response — "Let's make tents! Let's stay here always! This is good!" A cloud descends, thick and impenetrable. As it envelops the disciples, they fall to their faces, certain the end has come. But a Voice addresses them instead, tender and gentle. "This is my Son, my Chosen." The Voice hums with delight, and the disciples, braver now, look up. They gaze at their Master — the Shining One — and a Father's pure joy sings with the stars. "This is my Beloved Son. Listen to him." *

We all understand Peter wanting to prolong this amazing experience, to set it in stone and live in it. To make a holy shrine high on the mountain. They would build booths, enclosures that give privacy, and people would come and visit. Here on this mountain people would come to worship Jesus, Moses, and Elijah.

But Jesus says no and heads back down the mountain. He does not say, "Great idea. Let's build a building where people can come and worship God; after all that is the highest form of love." The real world, the real work isn't happening on that mountain. Jesus goes right down the mountain and begins a ministry of healing in the town. We see very clearly that the ministry is among the people who are in need of God. Jesus does not expect them to come to him, he goes to those in need.

But my little girl has another question, "Grandpa, how did the disciples know it was Moses and Elijah with Jesus? There weren't any pictures of them at that time. What did they say to Jesus? What did he say to them?" The gospels tell us they were talking about his departure, in Greek "exodus" which would occur in Jerusalem. His death will be an exodus, a passing over. As St Paul says, Christ our Passover is sacrificed for us. It is a passing over into Resurrection Life. Some scholars say this is Mark's resurrection story, the only resurrection picture we have in this Gospel because the risen Jesus doesn't appear at the end of Mark's story. And Grandpa said he really had no idea how the disciples knew it was Moses and Elijah. Maybe name tags?

We look to the resurrection and the life to come. But first, here and now, we look for those moments of divine transfiguration—that transcendent light, beauty, and fear and confusion that come with a religious experience.

But I have to listen to my sister priest, Dr Wil Gafney, who is Hebrew scholar and woman of color. The Rev. Dr. Wil Gafney talks about the importance of distinguishing whiteness from goodness and godliness. She writes that believing that white equals good perpetuates the sin of white supremacy within each of us. Our little girl may ask, “If I don’t believe Advent is about kings or light, what do I believe?”

Barbara Brown Taylor writes about the “dazzling darkness.” And as Allison Connelly-Vetter emphasizes, “There’s God, in the darkness. The ultimate Divine action in this story comes not in light, but in darkness, as it is in the shadow of the cloud that a Divine voice proclaims Jesus a beloved son. It’s not grand. This Gospel isn’t about becoming big or whittling ourselves down to an inner God. It’s not climbing a mountain under the heat of the sun or wearing blazing, dazzling white robes. This story is about meeting God, without fanfare, in the darkness. That resonates. It feels accessible and honest. It feels like God actually wants to meet me where I am.”

Our gospel story of the Transfiguration is always read on the Last Sunday of the Epiphany. It provides for us a sustaining vision during the long days of Lent. Our little girl may ask her Grandpa, “Are you ever afraid of the dark?” And he may answer, “There are times I have been.” But God dwells in deep darkness. God comes to us in dark clouds, dark nights, and dark dreams in ways that are scary. But if we read scripture, we see that God does some of God’s best work in the dark.

At the end of Matthew’s gospel story of the Transfiguration, he writes, “When the disciples heard this, they fell to the ground and were overcome by fear. But Jesus came and touched them, saying, “Get up and do not be afraid.” “Be not afraid,” or as the gospel translation The Message says, “Stop screaming!” We hear the words over and over in scripture. It is the reassurance that God is with us. But it’s also Jesus’ words, “Get up,” that are important. Because it’s not just “get up,” it’s “be raised,” the same word used by the angel to tell of Jesus’ resurrection. In this story of transfiguration and resurrection, he calls his disciples, and us, to be raised and to shed our fear, sending us forth into life restored and renewed.

* Debi Thomas