

February 26, 2017

Matthew 17:1-9  
Exodus 24:12-18

Transformation. It's a pretty attractive idea to us, if we look at our ads and our myths. Pretty much any magazine we pick up will offer us opportunities for transformation -- any number of products will remove unwanted fat or wrinkles or grey hair -- or add hair where it's gone missing. One can only assume that we are very eager to be changed from what we are to something different. I've just been reading an article about a diet that lets you eat all the fats, cream, egg yolks, vegetables, fruits, nuts, seeds, mayonnaise, whole wheat bread, pasta, cereal, crackers, brown rice and maple syrup you want to lose weight. I don't think so! It's clear we're lining up for almost any wacky scheme, particularly if it's easy, for transformation of any bits of our bodies we don't care for.

And then there are our fairy tales of transformation -- Cinderella, the Frog Prince, Beauty and the Beast, even our own generation's Shrek with its nifty turn on the old transformation theme. We're always dreaming about being different, being better, although for most of us with maturity comes an increasing acceptance of ourselves as we are, or at least "the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference."

But does genuine transformation occur? Jesus' fundamental being was not changed in the transfiguration story; he was simply revealed as who he really was. One person called transfiguration "the art of seeing," seeing things in a new and different and perhaps truer way. Are we ever revealed as somehow different from, more than, the beings we seem to be in our daily rounds? Are there ever moments when we are more "shiny," more light filled, more divine?

Preacher Ralph Milton tells this story of an experience he and his wife, Bev, had: "We are sitting at breakfast. The last day of a week-long Elderhostel. A couple we've talked to a bit on and off during the week come and ask if they can join us. The conversation wanders around bits of trivia from the top of our heads. Then it turns serious, and they are speaking from the bottom of their hearts. Their middle-aged son has just announced that he is gay and they are trying to come to terms with that -- psychologically and spiritually. That's the first image that came to mind as I poked around my brain trying to see what images of "transfiguration" I had in my head. That couple was transfigured for us -- from casual acquaintance to. . . well I'm not sure.

I look the word up in my dictionary and it says “dramatic change in appearance.” The couple doesn’t look any different than when they first sat down – well, yes they do, because the polite smiles are gone we can look deeply into their eyes to see a loving mother and father. Or is it that Bev and I move from superficial small talk to allowing ourselves to reveal our own pain and joy and we can see the loving parent in each other.”

I think we can all recall such moments in our own lives, when suddenly life went from superficial to profound, when suddenly we saw a person or situation in a whole new way; light filled, perhaps, transfigured, made holy, even. But we can’t stay there. It’s too intense. And maybe it’s too confusing and too scary. Peter and James and John simply didn’t know what to do with what they saw on the mountaintop. All they could think of to do somehow was to build little shelters for Jesus and Moses and Elijah. They just couldn’t understand. And Peter and James and John and even Jesus couldn’t stay on the mountaintop. They had to come down into the everyday world, with only the light filled memory to sustain and nurture them, to help them imagine the potential for holiness lying behind each encounter and action of their everyday lives.

Next Sunday and each first Sunday of the month we share Communion, an opportunity to encounter the sacred in everyday ingredients and ordinary human actions. When we pause, step away for a moment, for communion, we are acknowledging the potential for the holy in the everyday, we are inviting a new way of seeing, we are saying, “God, we seek to know you with greater intimacy and depth of understanding. We bring our whole bodies before you, as we consume the bread and fruit of the vine, and we ask that you would help us to see you in the world, at whatever level we are ready to see you.” It’s a very mysterious process, and of course God is the Great Mystery beyond all mysteries.

Can we connect the everyday events of our lives with the mountaintop moments? A well known Buddhist writer has written a book called, “After the Ecstasy, the Laundry.” Can we make a connection between the mountaintop and doing the dishes? Can we serve Jesus in tending our brothers and sisters in need as well as in our worship? Can we remember that God is as present in those brothers and sisters in need as God was present in that mountaintop moment?

One writer thinks the story of the transfiguration is so important we should celebrate it the way we do Christmas and Easter. And I can see why. Think

about it. Not only does God say “This is my beloved son.” God also says “Listen to him.” What would it mean if we really did? In recent weeks we have looked at parts of the Sermon on the Mount — the Beatitudes and Jesus call to his hearers to be salt and light for the world. What would the world look like if everyone lived out those lessons in each day and each encounter?

Can we seek out mountaintop moments? Of course we don’t get instant holiness anymore than we actually lose 20 pounds in three days when we purchase the products offered by those diet ads or follow the special diets. Moses stayed up on his mountain a very long time. Learning to live in God’s way is a lifetime project. Our ultimate transformation is long slow hard work. Let’s look again at the transfiguration story. There’s all this amazing dazzling light. And there are those great faith figures of Moses and Elijah. Then there’s the voice of God booming from the bright cloud. But then it is over and “they saw no one except Jesus himself alone.” Jesus himself alone. In the end, Jesus remains. Jesus remains as the reality of God’s presence. We cannot long endure the dazzling light, but Jesus stands as symbol for and reminder of it. The disciples come down from the mountain into the mundane world of suffering and mission -- accompanied by Jesus -- God with us -- and so do we. Thanks be to God. Amen.