

The Transfiguration Luke 9:28-36

A middle-aged woman had a heart attack and was taken to the hospital. While on the operating table she had a near death experience. Seeing God, she asked "Is my time up?" God answered, "No, you have another 40 years, 2 months and 8 days to live." Upon recovery, the woman decided to stay in the hospital and have a facelift, liposuction, and a tummy tuck. She even had someone come in and change her hair colour. Since she had so much more time to live, she thought she might as well make the most of it. After her last operation, she was released from the hospital. While crossing the street on her way home, she was hit by a car and died immediately. Arriving in front of God, she demanded, "I thought you said I had another 40 years, why didn't you pull me from out of the path of the car?" God replied, "Sorry, I didn't recognise you."

Today is The Feast of The Transfiguration!

We know that Jesus handpicked Peter, James and John on three separate occasions to be part of privileged moments in his life. The first place was the home of a synagogue official called Jairus. When Jesus was called to cure his desperately sick daughter. She died before he got there, and Jesus took Peter, James and John along with the girl's parents into the room where she lay. He took her by the hand, told her to get up, watched her walk around, told them to give her something to eat, and in that moment the balance of forces between life and death was changed irrevocably - and the three disciples were there to see it.

In the Garden of Gethsemane, the only three of his disciples Jesus took with him were Peter, James and John. He was in such a state of terror and distress at the prospect of crucifixion that he was tempted to give up on his messianic mission and get out from under the cross. *"My soul is sorrowful to the point of death,"* he told his disciples. *"Take this cup away from me,"* he begged of "Abba", his father. The acceptance of his father's will couldn't have come as easily in practice as it comes in Mark's prose. "Let it be, as you, not I, would have it". The three disciples missed this because they were asleep, but they wouldn't be able to sleep through their own suffering. *"Stay awake,"* was his warning to Peter. *"Stay awake and pray not to be put to the test"*.

Today we commemorate how Jesus was transfigured before his closest disciples, Peter, John, and James on the Mount of Transfiguration — how his glory was revealed in dazzling white light, and how God's voice proclaimed, *"This is my Son, my Chosen: listen to him!"*

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This time the disciples were frightened. If Gethsemane was to be one of Christ's darkest moments, the Transfiguration was the brightest so far. What frightened the three disciples wasn't the prospect of suffering, of course. It was the awesome encounter with the unfamiliar. Here was "the Christ" as they'd never seen him before. "Brilliantly white" in a way that couldn't be "earthly".

Adding to the unearthly and disconcerting nature of the experience was the presence of such illustrious figures as Moses and Elijah, who lived longer than others did in the memory of their people, but who, at the same time, had been a long-time dead. Their presence must be, in some way, an exaltation of Jesus, an exaltation that reached its zenith and startled them completely when the voice came down from heaven. "This is my Son, the beloved. Listen to him".

Traditionally, Moses and Elijah are seen as representing the Law and the Prophets, but Moses and Elijah were also people who had encounters with the Divinity. Both had to cross the desert, fast for forty days, and climb the mountain of God. Moses had prayed to God, "Show me your glory." When God revealed his back (not his face) to Moses, he placed him in the cleft of the rock, and when he came to Elijah as a gentle breeze, it was at the mouth of the cave. Perhaps these two are present as representing all those who desire to see God's glory, like Isaiah: "*When can I enter and see the face of God?*" Just as at the Baptism of Jesus, so also at the Transfiguration, the heavens are opened and we receive a glimpse of the inner life of the Trinity. Jesus is revealed as Son of the Father, who speaks from the cloud of Divine Presence, wherein dwells the Spirit.

"Transfigure" is not a word often used in conversation nowadays. We might use "transform" or "alter" instead, or even "change." Our kids play with *transformers*, not transfigurators! Here's an interesting question, though! Who is it that's really being changed in this story? Jesus appears to be changed. But the truth is, Jesus only looks different to his disciples. It is Peter, John, and James who are really transfigured, their eyes now open to see Jesus as he really is, clothed in light and revealed as the Son of God. And the disciples' lives are changed too, after this experience of God's presence: before, they thought they were following a remarkable teacher;

after, they know their lives are being woven into God's plan for the transfiguration of the world.

Much of the way we experience the world is fixed by circumstances beyond our control: who our parents are, where we are from, the language we speak. But sometimes we have moments of clarity which allow us to see the world in a new light, from a bird's-eye view. These are moments when it seems we can see beyond ourselves and our limitations, into the heart of reality. When we have this kind of experience, we can be fairly certain it's because we have been in the presence of God. Transfiguration is a natural consequence of being in God's presence.

Jesus took his disciples up on the mountain knowing they would find God there, and like Peter and John and James, we are called all of us to climb the mountain with Jesus. The same was true for Moses - God is found on the mountaintop, where vision is clear and all the noise of everyday life subsides. Something tremendous happens here – a mind-blowing experience for those on the mountain that day which changed them forever. They still had terrible things to see and suffer, but they had been in the presence of God. To be in the presence of someone who loves us puts a shine on our faces.

Of course, like Peter, there's always a temptation to stay put on top of the mountain — to use that sacred space as a place to hide from the problems of the world and just bask in God's glorious presence forever, content, but removed from all the trouble brewing down on the ground below. The answer is no. God needs us to go down from the mountain and out into the world, and take some of God's transformative love with us to share. There is no place on earth that God's love does not go. If we open our hearts to God's Spirit and go looking for God, we will begin to see God's presence all around us. Our transfiguration comes as our eyes are opened and our hearts changed. And the people who seemed so different from us before will be seen as they really are: made in God's image, just as we are; we will see how Jesus' life was spent for them, just as it was for us. It is our task to let our hearts be transfigured by God's love, and to take it down from this mountain and into the world.

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Life sometimes seems pretty dark, but God intends us to look back at those times of his clear revelation, so we might look forward to his ultimate deliverance. Twenty or thirty years after seeing Jesus transfigured on the mountain, the Apostle Peter can still see it vividly, and in the face of persecution and struggle, and his own ultimate martyrdom, he can boldly declare: *"We did not follow cleverly invented stories when we told you about the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eyewitnesses of his majesty. For he received honour and glory from God the Father when the voice came to him from the Majestic Glory, saying, 'This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased.' We ourselves heard this voice that came from heaven when we were with him on the sacred mountain."* (2 Peter 1:16-18) He was a witness of these things. We are witnesses, too, of how Jesus has met us and helped us, personally.

Martin Luther King Jr. in his famous speech told us all about his mountaintop experience:

We've got some difficult days ahead. But it really doesn't matter with me now, because I've been to the mountaintop. And I don't mind. Like anybody, I would like to live a long life. Longevity has its place. But I'm not concerned about that now. I just want to do God's will. And He's allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I've looked over. And I've seen the Promised Land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people, will get to the promised land! And so I'm happy, tonight. I'm not worried about anything. I'm not fearing any man! Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord!!

(I have a dream speech, Aug. 28, 1963).

Martin Luther King went to the mountaintop and God opened his eyes. The light in his heart shone out into the darkness. Those who go to the mountain come back changed and empowered. They come back ready to work for God's vision: to make that vision a reality. That is God's call to each of us, no matter how close to the summit we get. Mountain-top experiences are carried in the heart and are sustained when we share what we have experienced with each other.