

A TRANSFIGURING EXPERIENCE

I love this story of the Transfiguration of Jesus. Partly because Ann and I have spent many years in Jackson Hole, where there is that little log cabin Chapel of the Transfiguration, with a picture window over the altar framing the Grand Teton. It's one of the most beautiful places on earth. How many of you have been the Chapel of the Transfiguration in Wyoming?

But I particularly love this story because it relates vividly the experience that Peter, James and John had of Jesus on the mountain, when they knew – they knew for the first time – who Jesus really was. God became real to them in the person of Jesus, on that mountain.

During Jesus' earthly ministry, time after time the disciples acted less like followers and more like the Three Stooges, with not a clue who Jesus really was. In this vision of Jesus being transfigured, when they see Jesus' face shining like the sun, and his clothes dazzling white, with the two great figures from the Old Testament, Moses and Elijah, talking with him, and the voice from the cloud saying "This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him" – after that overwhelming experience of the holy, they knew. Peter and James and John knew -- not only in their heads but in their hearts, that Jesus was the Son of God. Peter, in his letter written many years later, testifies that this was no cleverly devised myth, but that they had heard it, they saw it, like a lamp shining in a dark place. And for Peter this experience was a confirmation of the prophetic message, a message of peace and love and justice – for all.

Have you ever had an experience like that, of those three disciples on the mount of Transfiguration? Or had an experience like that of St. Paul on the road to Damascus? I haven't – sometimes I wish I had. But I have had experiences of the holy, the Other, of a Higher Power. An experience of the transcendent, that there is more to our world than just what we experience with our five senses.

As some of you know, one of my favorite contemporary theologians is Marcus Borg, who unfortunately died recently. His last book is called *Convictions*, in which he sort of

sums up his message, what he would like to pass on to future generations. One of the things I admire most about Borg is that he is not just an academician, a theologian speaking in high and lofty terms from an ivy-covered tower. He is also a believer.

In this book Borg talks about a mystical experience of his that he says “made God real to me.” How many theologians can you think of who talked about God becoming real to them? Borg says there were actually a series of experiences, when he was in his early thirties, that like all mystical experiences, like falling in love, he says are difficult to express in words. But I’ll let him try.

Borg said he was driving alone on a sunny rural Minnesota winter landscape, when the light suddenly changed. In his words, “It became yellow and golden, and it suffused everything I saw: the snow-covered fields to left and right, the trees bordering the fields, the yellow and black road signs, the highway itself. Everything glowed. Everything looked wondrous. I was amazed” (he said). “I had never experienced anything like that before...” Sounds kind of like the experience of Peter and James and John at the Transfiguration, doesn’t it.

Borg continues, “At the same time, I felt a falling away of the subject-object distinction of ordinary everyday consciousness – that ‘dome’ of consciousness in which we experience ourselves as ‘in here’ and the world as ‘out there.’ I became aware not just intellectually but experientially of the connectedness of everything. I ‘saw’ the connectedness, experienced it. My sense of being ‘in here’ while the world was ‘out there’ momentarily disappeared.”

He says he became aware, in the words of the Psalmist, that “The earth is full of the glory of God.” Even though we don’t often see it. Such was Marcus Borg’s experience of transfiguration and of the presence of God.

Some years ago Ann and I were in Scotland on a sabbatical. I was not in a particularly good place spiritually. We travelled to the island of Iona, a tiny island off the SW coast of Scotland in the Inner Hebrides. We had visited one of the little chapels there, and I was sitting out in the churchyard under a tree, one of the very few trees on that island. Above me a bird started to sing. (And no, it didn’t do what you’re probably

thinking.) It sang, and it sang, and it sang. I lost track of the time, but it must have been for a half hour or so. An incredibly beautiful song – and I just knew that it was for me. I knew that God had sent that bird there to sing for me, and I was uplifted, drawn up out of my own self-absorbed problems into the presence of God. It was an experience of transfiguration. And I carry this rock from Iona with me always as a reminder. Because one of the good things about an experience of transfiguration is that although the experience itself fades, we can remind ourselves of it and be uplifted, again and again.

Another time, also during a difficult time in my life, I went to the San Francisco Symphony by myself, and the Symphony played something by Mozart. Suddenly there were tears streaming down my cheeks. And time just seemed to disappear – I became aware that those notes that Mozart had scribbled down on a piece of paper hundreds of years ago were alive in that auditorium right now and could move me to experience the beauty, the holiness of the eternal today.

One final story. We recently went to the funeral of an old and dear friend of ours, Barbara Lyon. Some of you knew her. Her late husband BB, or Boyd, was rector of the church in Fremont. Barbara was a free spirit, 96 years old, still healthy and vibrant and teaching yoga. She always had the most amazing smile. I was sure God was going to make an exception in her case, and she would live forever. But as she was driving her car a few weeks ago she was broadsided by a truck and killed instantly.

I've known BB and Barbara for over 50 years, since my days as an associate at St. Luke's. Her funeral overflowed the church in Fremont, even though there are very few of her contemporaries still alive. There were people there from her yoga classes, from her art classes, from dance, from her harmonica orchestra, from the church, from cursillo, from book groups. It was the community gathered, and not all were Christians, not all were church people. I knew almost no one – but they were friends of Barbara's and therefore friends of mine. And as I looked around at that congregation, I thought to myself, this is the world I want to live in. The shared world. God's world, where we are all children of the one loving God, sisters and brothers to each other.

On that holy mountain, God said to Peter, James and John, "This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!" When the disciples heard this, they fell to the ground and were overcome with fear. But Jesus came and touched them, saying, "Get up and do not be afraid." Get up -- do not be afraid.

Many of us are in a quandary about the world we're living in right now. The real fears and frustrations so many are living with. Worries about health care, financial security, safety, the environment, friends from other shores whose families and freedom are being threatened. Where is God in all this? What can we do?

In today's Collect we asked God "that we, beholding by faith the light of his countenance, may be strengthened to bear our cross, and be changed into his likeness." To which we replied "Amen." So be it. "Be changed – into his likeness." Transfigured, lifted up out of our everyday world, knowing that God is real and is with us.

Think of the times you've known that God is real. At the birth of a baby. Sitting on the seashore at sunset. Or in a quiet church. Times when you've felt such a sense of wonder and joy that you just couldn't be mad at anyone. Keep that little rock in your pocket and hold on to it.

And even though there may be times when we lose sight of God, God never loses sight of us. Remember that God does reveal Godself to us everyday, sometimes in the not-so-beautiful, in the poor and the hungry, the immigrant, the refugee, the sick and the needy.

May we all be transfigured and changed by our experience of God, and as Jesus said in another context, "Go, and do likewise."