

The Last Sunday of Epiphany: the Transfiguration
St. Luke 9:28-36; (37-43a)
March 3, 2019
St. George's Bolton
Fr. Chris

Very Special Moments

Today we remember the transfiguration of Jesus on the mountaintop and this might stimulate us to think of mountaintop experiences in our own lives. Every one has had them. This happens when our ordinary experience of life or someone we know is lifted above the everyday humdrum of our low expectations and something very special and wonderful happens. Transformingly wonderful! It is like turning on a light in the middle of the deep darkness of night and feeling the security of your home all around you when you were feeling insecure after a bad dream. It is like looking up in the night sky and seeing the many bright twinkly stars shining down on you. They are always there, as is their beauty, but we don't often look up at the sky at night anymore, and when we do, if we are too close to an urban area (most of us are) the light pollution will drown out much of this experience. I will never forget looking up and seeing the stars at night when camping in the national parks of the far-western United States, where you could literally see thousands of them. It was special and very uplifting. It was wonderful and I was awestruck. This was one of the mountaintop experiences of my life with which I have been blessed. So we can relate to what the inner circle of disciples experience that day on top of the mountain.

When thinking about the transfiguration this week, I was reminded of the TV Series on CBS called "Undercover Boss," where the "boss" goes undercover in one of their entry level or line level positions, and where they can learn what it is to work for themselves and how their employees think about them and the way they are running the business. They can also simply "be" themselves, and not the CEO or head of a company. This works because most people have never met the big boss they work for and few of us travel in the stratosphere along with others like the bosses. We are simply not in their class of beings. After the experience, many of the bosses learn how they can do a better job and be more sensitive to those who work for them. They find there is more to good business than making a profit on an investment, and that the real investment is in the people who make their business

work and be successful. Often the boss ends up being very generous with the employees they meet and the experience changes them. However, they are also “transformed” from co-worker where they have been working side by side with their employees, an ordinary person to being CEO before the eyes of their co-workers. Another glimpse of the mountaintop experience! I will never forget the expression on the faces of the workers when they discover the new worker they have been training or working with is the “big boss.”

This, I would assert is very much like what happened to the disciples on top of Mount Tabor this morning. Their experience with Jesus was that he was a very special rabbi and teacher, personable and charismatic, but they certainly did not think of him as the messiah, nor were there any serious suspicions about his divinity. Yet God was here walking among us. We neither recognized God, but instead related to him as one of our friends, a very special friend indeed, who was starting to touch the hearts of a few people.

So let’s define what we mean by this fancy, and somewhat uncommon word, Transfiguration. It simply means a change in our ordinary everyday perceptions and assumptions about something or someone we have taken for ordinary into the extra-ordinary. It is literally like a light coming on to reveal something wonderful about someone we thought we knew. We come to realize that we did not understand how special and holy a person that we know truly is, or even how special and holy a place is with which we had become too familiar. When we are too familiar with someone or something and do not expect much or anything different from them. The rising of the moon every evening is a small miracle and blessing, and yet, we also expect it to rise again tomorrow night like clock-work. What if we look up and see something different or something more in the night sky?

Transfiguration also implies a change in form or appearance, known as a metamorphosis, an exalting, glorifying spiritual change. When we see caterpillars munching on leaves or crawling on the bark of the tree, we may find the little creatures ugly or see them for the pests which they are. Then they crawl into their cocoons and emerge as beautiful butterflies that draw our eyes to them in awe and wonder. And they are with us for only a short time after their wonderful transformation. *[Most live from a week to about a month...] Needless to say, mountaintop experiences are very brief in their tenure and should be especially cherished when we encounter them.

Now there is the Transfiguration of Jesus, where He is changed from ordinary to extra ordinary, right in front of the inner circle of the disciples on top of Mount

Tabor. He becomes what they record as “Dazzlingly white and bright.” They are not sure how to react, and fall upon the ground, and when they look up, He is talking with Moses and the prophet Elijah. They don’t know how to react, and a part of them wants to hold onto the experience, building three dwellings, one for each of the persons that they have seen, as if they could enshrine the moment. But it is like trying to catch a butterfly in your hands, as soon as you do, you have lost something of the beauty of the experience. A voice comes from the clouds surrounding the mountaintop, exclaiming to them, “This is my Son, My Chosen. Listen to him!”

It also might go lost upon us that the two people talking to Jesus, both had encounters with God. Elijah [in 1st Kings 19:9-13] encounters God while on a mountain where he has gone to retreat:

“There he came to a cave and lodged in it. And behold, the word of the Lord came to him, and he said to him, “What are you doing here, Elijah?” He said, “I have been very jealous for the Lord, the God of hosts. For the people of Israel have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, and killed your prophets with the sword, and I, even I only, am left, and they seek my life, to take it away.” And he said, “Go out and stand on the mount before the Lord.” And behold, the Lord passed by, and a great and strong wind tore the mountains and broke in pieces the rocks before the Lord, but the Lord was not in the wind. And after the wind an earthquake, but the Lord was not in the earthquake. And after the earthquake a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire. And after the fire, the sound of a low whisper. [the still small voice of God] And when Elijah heard it, he wrapped his face in his cloak and went out and stood at the entrance of the cave. And behold, there came a voice to him and said, “What are you doing here, Elijah?”

In the First Covenant Reading this morning, Moses also encounters God on a mountaintop and when he comes down his face is seen as glowing after the experience. This should not be lost on us as we reflect upon the similarity of this experience for the Apostles who are present, Peter, James and John.

The position of the Transfiguration in the reading today should not be lost on us either, at the very end of the season of Epiphany when we reflected on the manifestation of Jesus to the world, and as we stand on the edge of the commencement of the Lenten season. It presages the future when Jesus will rise from the dead in a similar appearance at Easter-hence, the Transfiguration is like one of the bookends for the Lenten season, with Easter being the other “bookend.”

I have a small, simple story of one of several experiences of transfiguration moments in my own life. No mountaintop, but the experience gave me an inner glow after having been humbled by coming in contact with the Holy.

Dorothy & Lemira Gibbs (sisters) were nice little old ladies who attended my first parish church, St. Johns in Waterbury in Waterbury. I looked at them like fourth or fifth grade students in Christianity, and at myself as the newly minted seminary professor, (or so I held myself in such high and learned esteem.) We had a weekly bible study, which the weekly women's prayer group had requested. I gave a long, prepared, academic and thoughtful presentation about some scriptural passage I have long since forgotten. My exegesis, as they call it seminary, was overflowing with very heady stuff. At the conclusion of my "talk" I invited members of the group to chime in. Dorothy was one of the people who made a simple comment about the text in one sentence, with no frills that cut right to the heart of it's meaning. Lemira chimed in and also made a simple and brilliant observation about the meaning of the text, revealing she also knew exactly what it meant in context and in life, something which I had failed to communicate—maybe because I didn't really know it myself with so little experience so far in life at that time. To say the least I was humbled completely by these two women, and by extension, the whole group before me. In my pride and self aggrandized view, I realized that I had underestimated the lifetime experience, in practice and in prayer that was internalized and profoundly and simply expressed by these everyday saints, who were far greater than I, and whose knowledge of the Gospel of Jesus far exceeded mine. Their light shone in my eyes and they were transfigured before me. Holiness is all around you if you are willing to open your eyes and really look.

I invite you to join me on the mountaintop this morning and reflect on your own transfiguring experiences. Know that God is very near us if we open our eyes to see the light and our ears to hear that still small voice in the wilderness. AMEN