

Last Sunday After Epiphany  
Year A, RCL  
Feb 23, 2020  
North Fork Ministries  
Gospel:  
**Matthew 17:1-9**

Six days after Peter had acknowledged Jesus as the Christ, the Son of the Living God, Jesus took with him Peter and James and his brother John and led them up a high mountain, by themselves. And he was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became dazzling white. Suddenly there appeared to them Moses and Elijah, talking with him. Then Peter said to Jesus, "Lord, it is good for us to be here; if you wish, I will make three dwellings here, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah." While he was still speaking, suddenly a bright cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud a voice said, "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 by fear. But Jesus came and touched them, saying, "Get up and do not be afraid." And when they looked up, they saw no one except Jesus himself alone.

As they were coming down the mountain, Jesus ordered them, "Tell no one about the vision until after the Son of Man has been raised from the dead."

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In a few moments, in the midst of our celebration of the Eucharistic Feast, I will say on our behalf, "Therefore we proclaim the mystery of faith."

As Episcopalians we uphold the value of mystery and surely the scene described in today's gospel reading, with Jesus up on a high mountain, transfigured before his disciples, his face shining like the sun and his clothes dazzling white, depicts a biblical moment that is among the most mysterious in our faith. The mysterious moment reaches its climax when Peter is expressing his delight at gathering with Moses and Elijah and Jesus, when a cloud overshadows them all, and a voice from within the heavens proclaims, "This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!"

The story is so central to our faith that every year, on Transfiguration Sunday, the Sunday before the beginning of Lent, we read this story as it is told in Matthew or Mark or Luke. Yet the mysterious nature of the mountaintop experience persists no matter how many times we read it.

Matthew is describing a "transcendent moment", a mountain top experience - a moment when the presence of their holy was so real that the disciples fell to the ground, overcome by their fear. It's the same sort of transcendent experience we heard described in Exodus, where Moses, summoned by God's voice from inside a cloud, climbed Mount Sinai and passed 40 days and 40 nights in the presence of the glory of the Lord.

I think that many of us long for that kind of transcendent moment, especially if you have had a taste of it, and know what it's like to recognize the presence of the Holy Spirit as clearly as you recognize the faces of your children.

As your priest I have been blessed with a great vantage point from which I can look out over this assembly. Standing behind this pulpit or at the altar, I can often see, in your faces, when a transcendent moment occurs, during our prayers, while singing a hymn of praise, as you come up for communion. At times, I am privileged to witness, a transfiguration, a change in your appearance, faces shining like the sun.

I don't know how often we come to church looking for transfiguration. I suspect that most people don't come to church looking for trans-anything. Most people come to church seeking what they already know, something they are comfortable with - certainly not something that requires that they change. All the great religions began, had their origins, with transcendent moments – experiences of the holy. However, along the way, religion often allows creeds and dogma and doctrine to get in the way of the transcendent moment that first brings together a people of God.

That's why, when we find something that feels like a holy moment, we want to cling to it, return to it, capture it – like Peter, who was so taken with the mountaintop experience, with his vision of Moses and Elijah and Jesus chatting away, that he suggested that they build dwellings, where they could all stay and hang out together for a good long time. But Peter was jolted from his revelry by the voice of God telling him to listen to Jesus and then Jesus saying, “Get up and don't be afraid.”

In this passage we witness an immediate movement from the transcendent to the immanent; from the lofty to the universal; from the majestic to the common; from the unapproachable holy of holies, to Immanuel – God with us.

The difference between transcendence and immanence is often reflected in the creation of sacred spaces. Architecture affects the way in which we experience these two dimensions of the Divine. For example, high ceilings in a church, like in the great cathedrals of Europe, draw our eyes and our hearts, upward, toward that which is transcendent. An elevated chancel or high altar might have a similar effect, creating a sense in which, as we approach the sanctuary, that we are entering onto holy, sacred ground.

Conversely, if seating in the nave is arranged in a semi-circular fashion, rather than in rows as we have here, the presence of the collected community is more pronounced. Seating in the round presents the opportunity for the people to look into the faces of their fellow parishioners, to sense the Divine as it is conveyed and reflected in the presence of others. This is immanence.

We experience God's transcendence in the formal sharing of the Eucharist and we experience God's immanence in the continuation of communion as it flows from the altar to coffee hour and out into the world, where we continue to encounter the body and blood of Christ, made manifest in the living and breathing bodies of God's people.

In each of these settings, the opportunity for transfiguration is present. We are creating space in which a realization of the holy can happen - a place where we can become aware of a divine mystery that is always present, in all places.

At the Transfiguration, Jesus came to his disciples and touched them and said, "Do not be afraid." They had witnessed quite graphically, the divine presence among them – and at first they wanted to stay (even set up camp) and then they wanted to run away. Their fear, having come to a realization about the Divine nature of this man they had followed to the mountaintop, was that they might be transformed themselves, and that is, I promise, is a fearsome prospect.

The disciples realized that if they were to follow Christ, they would have to let go of their old way of being in the world. Peter wanted to build dwellings, where together with the old prophets, Moses and Elijah, they could stay, and experience God in the old comfortable ways. But Jesus had other plans in the works. This story of the transfiguration takes place right in the middle of the Gospel of Matthew. The disciples had already traveled long days with Jesus as he healed the sick, cast out demons, and befriended those who were spurned by society. But they still hadn't quite gotten the message. They hadn't yet accepted that they couldn't follow Jesus and continue to define him and themselves in the old ways. The transfiguration revealed an altogether new Jesus, and just as Jesus was being transfigured on the mountaintop, they too were on the threshold of transformation.

May God grant to us that we too, beholding by faith the light of his countenance, be changed into his likeness, from glory to glory.