

Last Epiphany, Year C
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Glory is the theme of the day. And today, as on every last Sunday in Epiphany, our Gospel lesson brings us once again to the mountain top with Jesus and three of his disciples. Probably the disciples didn't expect much more than a pleasant view of the country side below as they hiked up the mountain that day. Or maybe they thought they might find a tranquil spot for quiet prayer; a place to unwind from the stresses and strains of discipleship. Probably they didn't expect much more than that, but they got much more.

Some icons of this Gospel story show Peter James and John tumbling down the mountain with looks of surprise and awe on their faces. In those depictions they look like they had stumbled upon a fireworks display unawares. So much for a day of quiet reflection.

I once heard a preacher say "if the good that we dream of for ourselves would be enough to fill a bucket, then the good that God has in store for us would be enough to fill a water tower".(John Cook) And isn't that what we have experienced; that the most Transfiguring moments in this life go far beyond anything that we could have come up with on our own. The moments when we recognize the face of Christ shining with glory. Maybe it comes upon us when we are in worship and suddenly find ourselves awash in the experience of his love and life poured out for us. Or

those moments come when we are alone with God in silent prayer. Or we find transfiguration in our relationships with others, when barriers come down and we find ourselves encircled by a love that is greater than the sum total of our little loves. Or it's the profound and life altering experience of learning to live with an illness in our body. For some of us we experience it in art. For others we find it in music. Still others meet it as we serve a plate of food to someone who suddenly looks up at us with the face of Christ. For others of us the trigger is the deep beauty and wildness of nature. At times it can totally sneak up on us through something we think of as totally removed from the realm of the holy, but then suddenly we are swept up and the moment speaks to us about eternity and the One in Three who dwells there. And in those moments we are like the disciples; tumbling awestruck down the mountain.

But our Gospel tells us that Peter didn't stay in that reposed position for long. That wasn't Peter's style. He picked himself up, got his wits about him as best he could, and ran to Jesus with a plan to bottle the experience. He fell prey to the temptation that we often succumb to when we have experienced Transfiguration. He wanted to hold onto it; to make it last; to house it on the mountain; to contain it.

Contemporary Christian singer and songwriter, Margaret Becker gives voice to this same impulse in the words of her song “Higher Things”. She sings to God:

“If wishes did come true and dreams came to life,

I’d get a hold of you and never leave your side.

If it were up to me, I’d chain myself to you and throw away the key”

It seems to me those words capture what Peter was up to, and what we so often mimic in our own lives. We want to live on the mountain top, high above the ambiguity of life lived in time. But we find as he did – that’s not how transfigurations work. Transfigurations are something eternal, beyond time and space, so when they happen in time and space, they do not last. As soon as Peter spoke his words, the experience he longed to preserve vanished. And the wrinkle in time and space disappeared as seamlessly as it had come. Margaret Becker gives voice to this experience also as she continues her song:

But in the black and white I must live and breathe.

I’ll never capture you, but you could capture me.

And that is the truth about transfigurations, through them, God captures us. And we can see that what happened that day did capture the hearts of the 3 disciples. It changed their hearts, gave them broader vision

and sustained them on their way. Despite their uncertainty about the upcoming journey to Jerusalem, and the eventual death of the Messiah, the disciples remained faithful knowing that somehow, somewhere beyond their control, it all would make sense - just as it had in that brief, shining moment on the mountain.

Transfigurations are out of our control. They are pure gift from God to us. Jesus didn't transfigure himself. It was his utter trust in God and God's will that laid him open to that marvelous reality. And it was the willingness of the disciples to follow their teacher up the mountain that opened them up to witness the marvelous event. Following in their footsteps, we need not try to predict how God may touch us with the transfiguration glory. We need only be open to the fact that God is doing so, and that evidence will come to us at the right moments along the journey.

One last comment on transfiguration: though human beings seem bent on looking for evidence of God's actions in the big and powerful, so often God seems to be working out his purposes not through demonstrations of ultimate strength, but in places of need and brokenness. Those of us who traveled to El Salvador recently can testify to that. I am sure that the people of Haiti and those who are ministering to them feel it also. Maybe you feel it in the broken places of your life also - feel the awesome power of God at

work amidst brokenness and despair. There, where the challenges are so great, the glory of God is manifest beyond words.

As the amazing glory of the mountain top faded, The voice of God speaks from heaven – “This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him”. Then it was just them, and us, and Jesus - the itinerant rabbi, who had a penchant for life among the powerless and outcast. We will never capture his glory – but may his glory capture us, reflecting his light!

Amen+