

Last Epiphany A 2011

Exodus 24:12-18

2 Peter 1:16-21

Matthew 17:1-9

This is an iconic moment,
This moment on the mountaintop.

Of course that's true metaphorically.
A mountaintop experience
Is something we dream of,
And if it happens,
We treasure the memory,
Perhaps even take from it
Strength and inspiration.

So it's figuratively true
That this moment on the mountain
Is iconic, archetypal.

But when I say this,
I really mean that it's literally true.
The story of the transfiguration
Is an icon,
And in the story,
Jesus is an icon.

Jesus is an image
That reveals truth.

Jesus, the image of the invisible God,
Reveals the truth
By doing what an icon
Is made to do –
Reveal the light within.

Some of us have learned,
And some of us know intuitively,
That icons, especially those
From the eastern orthodox tradition,
Have a special radiance that comes from the light within.

Just by way of contrast,
Think of how often,
In paintings,
The light source comes from outside.

It's a basic assumption on our part,
That light will shine onto something,
And illuminate it.

But in a traditional icon,
The light source is inside
The object of our contemplation.
It glows through the face,
Even through the clothing.
Our prayer with the icon
Invites us to look through the subject
And find our way to the light.

So the transfiguration is,
Quite literally, an icon,
An image that invites us to see the light,
The radiance,
The glory
That lives within the humble person
Of Jesus of Nazareth,
Who can reach out and touch us,
Who is just like us.

You might expect, then,
That the world would be filled with radiant icons
Showing this mountaintop moment.
What better subject for an icon
Than the transfiguration,
When the inner light shines forth?

But it isn't so,
At least to my eye.
The transfiguration icons I have seen
Do not lead me into the experience
That I believe waits
On the mountaintop –
The experience of awe,
Of wonder,
Of reverence.

To me,
They lack radiance.

They speak of the disciples' fear,
Which is useful, in a way.
Fear, holy fear, is a sign of the presence

Of that which is infinitely beyond us.
And the invitation,
Don't be afraid,
Is the beginning of every message from the divine.

But the icons
Leave me stuck in that moment of fear,
Stuck on the near side
Of the gulf
We imagine
Separates us from the light of the divine.

So I, at least,
If I want to move beyond the fear,
Need to leave icons of the transfiguration behind,
And let the idea of what an icon can do
Speak to me instead.

An icon
Reveals the radiance within,
A radiance that is always there,
The fire of life,
The unquenchable energy of love.

That energy of love
That lights the world
Cannot be put out,
But we do our best, sometimes,
To soak and smother it.

Think of bright, vibrant Lucy Honeychurch,
Heroine of *A Room with a View*.
Frightened by the power of love,
She tries to throw herself away
On a man who cannot see the light within her.
When she leaves him,
But cannot let herself love the man who loves her,
She becomes cold and hard.

Her two friends,
Elderly maiden ladies
Who have a certain wisdom
Shining through their folly,
Cannot understand what has happened.
Finally, one says to the other,
I think I know . . .

She lacks –
Radiance.

We lack radiance
When we cut ourselves off from love.

Jesus, who is just like us,
Is never cut off from love.
His whole person
Is open to love;
It flows into him
And through him
In a steady stream,
And fills his whole being with light.
And his radiance shines through.

What he shows us,
What he reveals in and through himself,
Is that this is possible.
Jesus is just like us,
And yet the full glory of the divine
Shines through him.

The moment of transfiguration
Is simply a moment when we can see what is always true.
It happens every moment,
Everywhere.
Sometimes we can see it.

We can see it in Lucy Honeychurch,
In the moment when she opens her heart
And lets herself love.
Love brings her back to life.
Her face, in that moment,
Shines like the sun.

This moment,
When our faces shine like the sun,
Is the moment of truth.
This moment,
When we let love transfigure us
So that life shines through,
Is the moment
That makes us one with the source of life.

It's easy to miss it.
We haven't allowed ourselves to believe
That it makes all the difference.

We're on the way to Lent,
On the journey to the cross,
Into the darkness and back into the light beyond,
And it's easy to miss the mountaintop,
Or make light of it,
Or come down too quickly,
Because we believe we have a duty
To get out on the road that leads to the cross.

But this moment, this place,
shows us who we are,
And who we can become.

The more we open our hearts
To the love that lights the world,
The more our faces will shine like the sun.

The world is filled with radiant icons.
Look next to you in the pew.
Look on the street corners
At the men and women holding cardboard signs.
Look at the photos in the newspaper,
Of protesters and movie stars
And high school athletes.

Each of these could be an icon,
Because each and every one
Is holding a light within.
When the light shines out,
Then the glory is revealed.

For us, the light goes out.
And then returns,
And then goes out again.

Jesus is the one who can hold the light
All the time.

What we celebrate today
Is that, when we look at Jesus on the mountaintop,
We see what is true,
Always and everywhere.

He holds that unquenchable radiance.
He shows us the truth
That it is always there.

I don't know why the disciples who were there
Didn't tell the story.
I don't believe the voice from heaven
Really told them to keep it a secret.
I think they were afraid.
It was fear that kept them quiet.

And no wonder.

This is a hard story to tell,
A hard image to live up to.
The light of the world
Is among us, and
If we carry the light within us,
Then what might happen if we let it out?
Everything might change.
Better to believe than someone else has the light,
And that it shines on us from the outside.

And yet,
The glory of God
Is a human being fully alive,
as one of the first leaders of the early church proclaimed*
We are fully alive when,
Like Lucy Honeychurch,
We open our hearts to love,
And the glory shines through.

This is our story.
It is Jesus who leads the way
To the mountaintop.
But if we follow,
Then we too will enter the bright cloud,
And like him,
Take on the image that is ours,
The image of the invisible God,
Whose glory is to see us fully alive.

*Irenaus