

Holy God, guide us into moments of letting go, letting go of expectancies, anxieties and certainties, that, softened by the silence, surrounded by the light, and open to the mystery, we may be found by wholeness and upheld by the unfathomable that is you. Amen.

Today, on the last Sunday of Epiphany, the season of light, we reach this kind of crescendo of brilliance in the story of the Transfiguration in Matthew. Jesus is revealed to be something much more than the disciples realized – something they may have caught glimpses of but something way more than they could ever imagine. In a somewhat irreverent comparison, this moment could be compared to a Hollywood horror movie, where your sweet border collie, who you've had for 5 years, suddenly grows a green tail and 5 extra eyeballs so you get, maybe just a hint, that something much bigger, is going on. Did the Transfiguration actually happen? The story appears in all 3 gospels and Matthew, Mark and Luke give almost identical accounts. It does harken back to what happens to Moses after he receives the 10 commandments, that we read about in the first lesson. Moses comes down with a face that is so shiny that he has to wear a veil over it whenever he talks to the people. And the words God uses on that mountain top are almost the same words that God speaks at Jesus' baptism. But, of course, as in most Biblical stories, as Marcus Borg observed, it matters less whether it actually happened but only that it is true.

It says in the account in Matthew, that Jesus led 3 of the disciples – Peter, John, and James – up to a high mountain apart. Jesus seems to have had a healthy appreciation for selfcare, as we might say today, balancing the time he spent with large groups of people with times of quiet and prayer. So to Peter, John, and James, it probably just seemed like business as usual. They weren't expecting anything other than some rest and peace and a chance to be with their teacher.

Jesus and the 3 disciples arrive at the top of the mountain, maybe moving a few rocks to make a comfortable spot to kneel or sit. They settle down, and at some point, the disciples become aware of a new glow, a new light that appearing. Were they praying with their eyes closed and suddenly they open them to see Jesus with his face shining like the sun? Or were they watching Jesus as his face became radiant and his clothes turned to white?

As Joseph Campbell describes that moment, “Jesus is the guide the way, the vision, and the companion of the return. The disciples...are introduced to the paradox of 2 worlds in one... Flesh had dissolved before their eyes to reveal the Word. They fell upon their faces, and when they arose, the door again had closed.” *(The Hero with 1000 Faces, p. 230)*

Scarcely have they become aware of this change than 2 people appear, not 2 pilgrims of their time and place, but 2 of the greatest prophets of the Hebrew Scriptures – Moses and Elijah – talking with Jesus. The moment is so seamless. Moses and Elijah seem to be talking with Jesus in a conversation that began long before that mountain top and that probably continues still. And how do they respond?

Do they bask in the one glorious moment? Not really. Instead of allowing that moment to transform them, they try to transform it. The disciples react as we might react.

If a few moments of something amazing is good, then many hours of it must be better, that kind of thinking. They had a taste of the divine and they didn't want to let it go. Suddenly they find what they have always been searching for. They were awestruck.

They knew that something entirely new, entirely beyond their time and their place had happened. They knew those things in their minds, intellectually, but they themselves had not been changed.

They were still the same well-meaning but somewhat dense disciples. Moses and Elijah start to leave and Peter, sensing the moment is almost over, acts quickly.

“Lord, it is well that we are here, if you wish, I will make 3 booths here,

one for you, one for Moses and one for Elijah.”  
As an aside, although Peter never built those booths,  
ironically, there are now 2 monasteries –  
one Roman Catholic and the other Eastern Orthodox –  
on the top of the mountain presumed to be the site of the Transfiguration.  
They seem to stand there in mutual hostility,  
just proving that we humans never learn.  
The disciples understand with their minds that something extraordinary  
had happened but their hearts are the same old hearts.  
So God wraps them in a dense cloud,  
taking away their sight and their bearings.  
Because it is usually in those disorienting, even dark moments,  
that God really can get our attention.  
No compass or map or previous experience can guide us.  
Where we may be taken apart so we can be made new.  
It is a cloud of unknowing that is essential  
for allowing the transformation that God intends for us, to take place.  
Now they are forced to walk by faith and not by sight.  
God speaks to them from the cloud and when the cloud is gone,  
they are there, alone with Jesus.  
Everything is apparently back to normal but they have been changed –  
not just their minds, but their hearts as well.  
Jesus tells them to keep silent about what they have seen  
but I think that may not have been necessary.  
They had been touched by God and the only way we can respond  
when we have been touched by God is silence.

I'd like to end with 2 stories that describe  
what happens to us when we allow the divine to take hold of us.  
The first is a story about St. Thomas Aquinas,  
who wrote probably the most thorough and extensive work of theology  
ever, the Summa Theologica,  
that Wikipedia estimates takes 50 hours to read!  
One day, St. Thomas stopped writing.  
When his secretary complained that his work was unfinished,  
Thomas said, “Brother Reginald,  
some months ago I experienced something of the Absolute,  
so all I have ever written about God seems to me now to be like straw.”  
Something had happened to St. Thomas that moved him  
to let go of all those words

and invited him to know God not with just his mind  
but with his heart as well.  
His only response was silence, just like the 3 disciples.  
The Summa Theologica is unfinished.

And then there is a story from the Buddhist tradition.  
When the mystic came down from the mountain  
he was accosted by an atheist who said sarcastically,  
“What did you bring us from that garden of delights you were in?”  
The mystic replied, “I had every intention of filling my skirt with flowers  
and giving them to my friends on my return.  
But while I was there, I became so intoxicated  
with the fragrance of the garden that I let go of the skirt.”

I pray that all of us might invite the intoxicating and disorienting  
fragrance of God to so fill us  
that we let go of knowing God in our minds  
and allow God to move in our hearts.  
It is in those moments, finally, at last,  
that we can begin to be remade into the people God has always hoped,  
is always hoping, and will always hope we become. Amen.