

Transfiguration Sunday-Year B- The Rev. Jennifer B. Cleveland 2.11.24

My good friend Merriam Webster describes transfiguration as changes in “form or appearance, especially changes that beautify or glorify.” Given that definition, it might be fair to say that transfiguration, of some sort, is constantly in the news, in the air or on our minds. We might not always talk about it much with one another, but the hope of being transfigured in ways big and small motivates a lot of what we do: exercises, habits, diets, resolutions. Transfiguration is a driver for what we buy: hand and face creams, clothing, teeth whitening toothpaste. Nobody says, “I am headed to the gym to work on my transfiguration,” but that desire to live healthily *and* experience a change in appearance is pretty common.

When we look into a mirror, we might notice how that outward appearance doesn't look quite the same as it used to (there are a few more wrinkles and sags than there were a few years ago). The Collect today—that opening prayer that often sums up the theme of the readings and the morning with laser-like clarity—speaks to that outward change in form or appearance, but of a different kind. We prayed for ourselves and for one another, that we would “be changed into Jesus' likeness from glory to glory.” Today, we look to Jesus' Transfiguration and pray for ourselves and each other—that we might take on that likeness.

Before we get to Jesus' transfiguration, we first hear the incredibly gracious and gentle story of Elisha and Elijah, traveling together through what are clearly Elijah's last days. How everyone they met kept saying to Elisha, “You know, Elijah is about to die,” and how Elisha kept responding, “Yes, I know. I don't need you to tell me that. I just plan to keep walking with him as long as I can.” And how he did that. If you have ever walked with someone or a beloved pet in companionship and love their last days, you know what a holy and sacred journey that is. Celtic spirituality calls such times a thin place—those places when the perceived borders or separation between this world and the kingdom of God dissipate. Those times when our 24-hour clock and our keeping track of the days according to our calendar become irrelevant because just being present is all that matters. During thin times, in thin places, our everyday lives and the holy are woven together. Elijah and Elisha are in a thin place together because Elijah is about to die and Elisha is with him every step of the way on that journey: accompanying, caring, keeping vigil and then watching for as long as possible, until the whirlwind comes and Elijah is taken into it and then is gone. Elijah is transfigured in death and this change towards beauty and glory that happens in death (not just the sacred time preceding death) is also a thin place. Transition times from birth to death to new birth are very thin.

Of course there are geographical thin places; pilgrimage destinations and sacred sites—Jerusalem, Mecca, El Camino, Iona, and so on—places where the membrane separating our ordinary lives and the holy is so thin that God's glory shines through so strongly. The Diocese is offering a Civil Rights Pilgrimage, going to places where more and more people are pausing to acknowledge bloodshed and violence, and to honor and understand the holy act of honoring those who suffered. A thin place is “anywhere our hearts are opened” to receive God and others. (See M. Borg foundation)

The wilderness is a thin place, too, of course, where people encounter the Creator, known by many names. That's not just a Pacific Northwest phenomenon, but how fortunate are we to be surrounded by mountains: more thin places. Moses's closest encounter with God takes place on a mountain. And that's where we find Jesus, Peter, John and James today, too. On top of a mountain. Of course, Jesus and these several disciples aren't just in a thin place, geographically speaking. In the Transfiguration, Jesus actually becomes a thin place. Where the inside radiance of God becomes fully revealed. The beauty, joy and hope of all creation shines forth. And it's spectacular.

So few were present when the Transfiguration happened. In that moment when Jesus becomes the thinnest of thin places, completely revealing the bright love of God—not just in his actions, but in his whole being—only Peter, James and John were there. That is interesting to me. Maybe they were the only ones who were willing to get up early enough to make the trek, but the Collect, that opening prayer for us to become like Jesus sent me back to Thomas á Kempis' *Imitation of Christ*. Thomas was a German-Dutch monk writing between 1420 and 1427 (pre-Reformation) and just as it's interesting that only a couple of the disciples were with Jesus at the Transfiguration, Thomas wrote the *Imitation of Christ* to other monks. Sometime between 1420 and 1427, he wrote, *Jesus has always many who love His heavenly kingdom, but few who bear his cross. He has many who desire consolation, but few who care for trial. He finds many to share His table, but few to take part in His fasting. All desire to be happy with Him; few wish to suffer anything for Him* (39). The book has a strong claim to be one of the most-read books ever written aside from the Bible. By 1779 there were at least 1,800 editions and translations. And yet reading about imitation and seeking imitation are two very different things. Even the closest of followers, such as disciples and monks, struggle with the deepest aspects of imitation and transfiguration.

Thomas Merton once said, "Life is this simple. We are living in a world that is absolutely transparent and God is shining through it all the time. This is not just a fable or a nice story. It is true. If we abandon ourselves to God and forget ourselves, we see it sometimes, and we see it maybe frequently. God shows [God's self] everywhere, in everything - in people and in things and in nature and in events. It becomes very obvious that God is everywhere and in everything and we cannot be without God. It's impossible. The only thing is we don't see it." (M. Borg, *The Heart of Christianity*, p. 155 ff). Life is simple. We are living in a world that is absolutely transparent and God is shining through it all the time. The only thing is we don't see it. The words of today's Collect are a prayer for us not just to *seek* thin places, but for us to *see* thin places—yes, in nature, but also in ourselves and in one another. To be the bright love and compassion of Jesus.

I remember a wedding the weekend after September 11. All week long, the couple was wondering if the wedding should take place in the midst of such tragedy and grief. They decided to proceed ahead, and at the wedding, the officiant (it wasn't me) said, We are sitting with so many unanswered questions. So much confusion, so much pain and sorrow. But there is one question that has been answered very clearly: what matters. Be in love. Stay in love. Share love. Be love. And, dearly Beloved, tell people you love them.

These few days between Transfiguration (today) and Ash Wednesday (Wednesday) are a thin place. Today the focus is on Jesus's transfiguration. On Wednesday, the focus will shift to us and our transfiguration. That's the work of Lent. And it begins with Ash Wednesday, that moment of coming before God to say, "Here I am. I know that I stand somewhere between birth and death and re-birth. How might I imitate you more closely? How might I reveal you more fully? Here I am. Maybe ready, maybe not, to be in love. Stay in love. Share love. Be love.