

February 15, 2015 -- The Transfiguration – Mark 9: 2-9

The Transfiguration is a journey story which contains a number of hints for us to use in our spiritual journeys. The very first sentence informs us that Jesus led three of his followers up a mountain. There were no Christians at that time, these men were Jews. Jesus' followers were known as "Followers of the Way".

I have a very personal connection with that name for them. In my early thirties and interested in baptism, I consulted with the minister of my large, non-denominational church. It was necessary to confess that there were many obstacles due to the largely masculine references to God, and even Jesus. However, my experiences of the Holy Spirit were deep and had richly informed my spiritual life. The lifestyle I had adopted was a lifelong commitment to healing and growth toward wholeness which clearly paralleled the teachings of Jesus. It seemed that I walked a parallel track, but couldn't seem to make the leap over to the same track to be with Jesus. He smiled and reminded me that surely as an artist I was familiar with the laws of perspective. "Somewhere on the horizon, those two paths come together," he said.

That Palm Sunday, with several other adults, I presented myself for baptism. As he baptized each candidate, I noticed that the words he used changed so they were suited to each individual. My trepidation began with the two people before me who apparently had very traditional approaches. When he baptized them saying, "Do you accept Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior?" I thought to myself, "If he says that to me I might have to politely decline and offer to come back another time." However, after standing my ground, my fears were relieved as he baptized me a "Follower of the Way"! At the time I had no idea of the significance of this term's connection with the ancient church.

Now we're going to climb a mountain with Jesus and three of his disciples, Peter, James and John. If I'm going to climb a mountain, I want to know who I'm traveling with. While pondering this Gospel reading in preparing to talk with you today, it seemed appropriate to look at it with new eyes. First, we will have to walk to where it is that we will climb this mountain. This produced an unexpected and awe inspiring understanding of walking next to the corporal, flesh and blood Jesus. What must it have been like to walk beside him, to talk with him, experience the profound and inspirational teacher that he must have been. It took most of the afternoon to work through that! For me, based on the scriptures we read on Sundays, Peter is the head of the young church. He is a thinker who has learned very well the teachings, helps keep all the ducks in a row, but in application sometimes gets things wrong. He then re-applies himself with good intention and in doing so provides for us a wonderful example. He symbolizes the head of the church. James is the brother of Jesus and as such represents the relational aspect of our Christian lives. The relational reaches out to those both within and outside of the community creating and providing ministry. He symbolizes the hands of the church. John is a mystic, devoted to Jesus, and so thoroughly understands the teachings that he is able to express them in a completely different way than the other Gospel writers. John is the heart of the church. In these three we have a wonderful model for wholeness for ourselves as individuals as well as for

the community as a whole. The church cannot function with only one aspect but with head, heart and hands in balance a community will flourish.

So, now Jesus and the three have reached the top of the mountain. What do they see? Their leader, brother, friend, and rabbi is radiant with Grace – the incarnate God! This astounding perception turns their world, their assumptions upside down. This is depicted well in the icon of the Transfiguration. Their bodies are falling and twisted askew. As they watch, Moses and Elijah appear and are talking with Jesus. Moses brought the Ten Commandments and taught his people the rules by which to live as good Jews. He represents the “law” to me. Elijah was the epitome of a prophet. He went into the desert because he was angry with God – and God sent Ravens to feed him. When his time on Earth was finished, God sent a fiery chariot to carry him away. He represents all the prophets. In this scene we have a visual reminder of the scripture in which Jesus is asked to explain which commandment is the most important. His reply is to love God with all your heart and soul and mind, to love your neighbor as yourself – on this hang all the law and the prophets. Then Moses and Elijah disappear and the disciples, and we, are left to realize that it is the incarnate God which we must now follow.

Jesus was transfigured, but the disciples were transformed. I wonder if we might not change the title of this story to place the emphasis on what happens to the disciples, and us. Surely it is easy for God incarnate to show himself in radiance to the disciples. It is not easy, however, for the disciples, and us, to manage transformation. Calling it the Transformation would remind us of the difficult task that is set for us as we interact with God.

Peter, James and John have two reactions to this amazing mountaintop experience. The first is fear and trembling – no surprise there. Direct interface with God can be as sweet and gentle as a sunrise, or so precipitous to our perspective and so challenging to our assumptions that it is truly frightening.

The second reaction was to build three shelters: one for Moses, one for Elijah, and one for Jesus. It is only human nature to try to enshrine such an experience, attempting to confine, define and place it “over there” outside of ourselves. In so doing, we attempt to get some distance from it rather than allowing it to live through us in our hearts. It is essential to resist the temptation to treasure our mountaintop experiences, seemingly to worship them. These experiences are intended to challenge us. They invite us to live through the experience to a greater good – to be transformed.

Jesus then tells the disciples to tell no one. In our spiritual lives, coming from an experience of God and just ventilating all that energy by talking about it serves no one. Keeping the experience close to one’s heart allows the energy to work within, towards transformation. At a later time, it may be a minute, a day, or years later, a person or situation will express itself in words which resonate with the experience. That is when you will know it is time to share it.

Now I will tell you a story of the Transfiguration from life. Many of you know Fr. Alexander Tkachenko, the founder of Children's Hospice. When asked for his permission to tell this story to you he granted it then added that I might use any good knowledge I may have of him if it is intended to encourage the faith of believers.

Years ago I had an experience in which God told me that I am his beloved. Immediately I associated it with the scriptures of the Baptism of Jesus in which a voice comes down from a huge cloud and says, "This is my beloved, with whom I am well pleased." At that time in my life the healing and affirmation afforded me in that statement was much needed. In 2004 I spent a month in Russia. It was the first time I had been that long away from home. The last week, in the middle of the night, a lengthy experience of God occurred a portion of which pertains to our Gospel lesson today. Fr. Alexander was standing before me. I was instructed to stretch out my hand at arm's length in a sign of blessing. As you may know, he is very much taller than I so this would put my hand immediately in front of his heart. As we stood in silence I felt the grace and healing energy coursing through me to him. And, I felt him receiving it. Then God spoke, "This is my beloved." Over the past year, Fr. Alexander and I had developed a spiritual friendship, so I called him the next morning and asked if he could be alone when I spoke with him. God bless him! He had just arrived at his new church and trudged out into the snow laden cemetery to stand in the snow in order to talk privately with me. After relating to him what had transpired the night before, he exclaimed, "The Transfiguration is my favorite scripture! This is my Son, the beloved, listen to him!" It wasn't until preparing this talk that I realized why this one and not the Baptism. He was a young priest absolutely convicted with the inspiration to help sick and dying children in a country which has never known pediatric hospice or palliative care. Each day brought seemingly insurmountable obstacles – no one would listen to him.

Our spiritual friendship has continued to deepen over the past 13 years. We have supported each other in innumerable ways, literally praying each other into the next stage of our progress. Today all of Russia listens when Fr. Alexander talks about pediatric hospice and palliative care. The Transfiguration occurred spiritually between us in 2004 and carried itself forward to today.

We are all Followers of the Way. Let us journey into Lent bringing with us the lesson of Transfiguration and Transformation.

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