

Transfiguration

Sermon for Last Sunday, Epiphany February 22 2009

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"And he was transfigured before them, and his clothes became dazzling white, such as no one on earth could bleach them..."

Mark 9:3

What a wonderful, homely description of one of the great moments in the lives of the disciples of Jesus of Nazareth! It was a time of cosmic vision and breakthrough-- when the deepest mystery of the universe was seen by human eyes in what we know as the Transfiguration of the Christ. Like Moses on the Mountain, they were face to face with the Glory of God. In his very human way, Mark tries to describe the indescribable. "Boy, were those clothes white! You could never get clothes that white, even with the best bleach!"

So human beings are confronted suddenly with a vision of God. Peter babbles incoherently, and the writer of the Gospel struggles with the inadequacy of human words to describe the divine presence. In the Transfiguration one sees an expression of those rare and deep moments when the veil is parted, and we see through the created order to the fire and love that lies behind it.

Such moments are rare-- and we are lucky to have one or two in a lifetime. I have been blessed with several such experiences, when I felt and knew the presence of God as a burning fire, which burst into my consciousness and changed the course of my life. However, I am thinking today of experiences that occur not as divine explosion, but as a dawning of awareness. I remember once driving down a road in springtime, on Greenfield Hill in Fairfield, Connecticut. I was returning home from college for a date with the young woman who was later to become my wife.

It was a lovely day in May, and the dogwood blossoms were out in profusion. I was enjoying the scenery as I drove along, when something suddenly caught my eye in the trees on the left side of the road. I suppose it was a play of sunlight on a leaf, but it had such an impact on me that I stopped the car on the right shoulder of the road and looked across at the line of trees on the opposite side.

As I gazed, they became for me transfigured. It was as if the life in them, the sap rising through the trunk and branches, the energy of light that was pouring into the leaves from the sun, the essence of their being became lit from within. Here before me was a manifestation

of that *divine within* that underlies the creation. Here was an opening to the living presence of God through nature itself. I was experiencing what the transcendentalists of another century called the "cosmic vision", where a certain awareness of the goodness and oneness of all of life breaks through the material veil in all its glory.

I sat transfixed on the shoulder of the road, looking across at those trees which seemed to me to be transfigured. At that moment I was as certain of the reality and love of a creator as I was of the existence of the car in which I sat. The moment did not last long, but I have never forgotten it. It rises to consciousness whenever I read this story from the gospel of Mark.

All experiences of transfiguration are not dramatic. They occur to us in the normal course of our lives-- though often they are not recognized as such. I remember, for instance, the experience of "growing in love" with Joyce Hoinacki. In those days of the romantic expectations of the 1950s, you were expected to *fall* in love. But having been raised in a culture and family who shared great caution about emotions and with a need to control events, there was not much likelihood of my *falling* into anything! For me there was instead the slow, growing realization and then the certainty that Joyce was the woman with whom I wanted to live my life.

Yet even with all of my caution and hesitancy, there was a moment when love blossomed and I saw her with new eyes. Suddenly she was not just another human being, but one of infinite value and beauty, who touched a level of my soul that had never been touched before. At that moment she was changed into someone *new*. She was transfigured. I wonder how many of you have experienced that change of perception that comes when you are aware of a deep, transforming love. I hope that all of you have.

Another such transfiguration occurs with the arrival of parenthood.

There is something about having a child-- and especially a first child--that opens a deep mystery in the souls of the mother and father. In a sense we have become co-creators with the God of the universe.

I remember the first experience of really meeting my oldest daughter, Ginger. She was lying in a bassinette in the hospital corridor, and I suddenly realized whose child she was. I reached into the bassinette, and her tiny hand closed around my finger. That little hand became transfigured as I was aware of the mystery of new life, and the connectedness of the generations in the love of the Creator. That moment is etched in my memory forever.

There are in our lives many moments such as these--in our human relationships, our experiences in nature-- and sometimes even in a church service-- that become openings for the holy. A shift of light occurs-- or a shift of the spirit-- and suddenly something quite familiar and ordinary becomes transfigured, shining with new meaning from within.

We come today in our liturgical season to the last Sunday in Epiphany-- the Sunday of the Transfiguration. Hovering on the edge of Lent, the Christian Church remembers the vital experience of the apostles on the mountain. At a pivotal moment in Jesus' ministry, their eyes were opened and they saw him in a new way. Their perception was sharpened to see through the veil of flesh to the glorious light of the Spirit itself, which lay behind the human form of Jesus and broke through as the Christ in transfigured power.

If we are fortunate, there are times in our lives when such dramatic, transfiguring experiences of God pass our way. They are few and far between, and no one experiencing them is ever, ever the same again. But I hope that I have shown that life brings us many other transfigured moments, if we have the eyes to see them and the hearts to comprehend them. And every one of them is an expression of the love of God which undergirds our very being.

I would suggest to you that the purpose of the Holy Eucharist which we celebrate each Sunday is to provide an opportunity for transfiguration. Each week we come to the altar, where ordinary bread and wine are held up into the stream of the spirit, as we pray that God will help us see through them to the divine, self-giving love they symbolize and express.

We bring to this altar, each one of us, all the moments of our days and years-- those which have been transfiguring and those which have not, our joyful moments and our deep suffering. Here we offer them to the Lord of Creation, and ask that our eyes may be opened to see the light that hovers beneath and beyond them. How is God present to us in a lover, our spouse, our child, the beauty of nature or the joy of a task skillfully and creatively accomplished? How is God present in suffering and loss? As we receive the bread and the wine, do we find our lives touched with grace?

Can we see that flash of divine light which illuminates something or someone we have taken for granted? And what else is prayer, but the experience of such vision? As we prepare ourselves for the rigors of Lent, and for the study, discipline and worship which readies us to experience the crucifixion and to celebrate the resurrection, may we ponder the experience of the disciples on the Mountain. And may its power reach us in little and great ways as we experience our own Transfiguration.