

**The Palisades Presbyterian Church
Palisades, New York**

Transfiguration Sunday
February 18, 2007

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| 1 st Readings | Exodus 34:29 - 35 |
| Anthem | <i>Great Day</i> Arranged by B.W. Dennard |
| 2 nd Reading | The Gospel of Luke 9:28 - 36 |
| Hymn #89 | <i>Hosanna, Loud Hosanna</i> |
| Hymn #73 | <i>Swiftly Pass the Clouds of Glory</i> |
| Hymn #554 | <i>Let All Things Now Living</i> |

Reflection

Scattered patches of muted gray,
then the first touch of pink brushes the sky;
the shifting sky, a living thing, turns
complete pink with blue breaking through.
Now the sounds of the birds singing,
life awakens to the new day.

For an instant a veil parted,
and I felt my mother's living spirit
splashed across the sky.
Oh, the first sparkling of light,
the rays of light stronger than the clouds.

Heavenly blue,
I can see the whole sky.
There's something else I'm trusting now;
I am part of it.

The Fable of the Invisible Woman by Starr Goode,
In The Rule of Mars, Edited by Dr. Cristina Biaggi

"I'm trusting now; I am a part of it"
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On a clear day
Rise and look around you
And you'll see who you are
On a clear day
How it will astound you
That the glow of your being
Outshines every star
You'll feel part of every mountain sea and shore
You can hear
From far and near
A word you've never, never heard before...
And on a clear day...On a clear day...
You can see forever...
And ever...
And ever...
And ever more. . .

I think it was something like that, that day on Mt. Thabor. After traveling for several days from Caesaria, Jesus takes the disciples up to the top of the mountain. He takes Peter, his brother John, and James to pray in the high place; some think a thin place between this world and the next.

Praying with Jesus must have been something in itself, even if he never said a word. In his presence, in prayer and meditation, deeply, transcending, unleashing the intimate presence of God that exists in each of us – in a blink of an eye, or maybe as gradually as the rising sun – Jesus (and we, they) are changed, transfigured, in his presence.

Maybe it was like that.

The Scripture says he shone whiter than any fuller (a bleacher) of the day could make white. As if that vision were not astounding enough, the Lawmaker and the Prophet emerged by his side. Imagine the sight, the deep presence of Moses, Elijah, and Jesus. We've all felt presence like that, even if unseen. It produces, as the Greeks say – a metamorphosis.

And just as in our hearts, when we talk and pray to God; there on the mountain, in that place, that presence, that prayerfulness and meditation, that thinness between this world and the this world we barely see -- Moses and Elijah and Jesus spoke, Luke tells us – about Jesus' departure.

Once more, as Mark reported at the time of Jesus' baptism, once more preceding what will happen when Jesus expires on the cross – in this middle thin place of Jesus' ministry the heavens are rent, torn apart – the natural, as we know it, is separated, and once more, as at his baptism God's voice is heard.

Unlike Moses' experience, the prayerful group did not find themselves outwardly burnished, shining as did Moses after receiving the commandments high on another mountain long before. Unlike Moses' experience, there was no outward physical difference in Jesus or the three who were present, following the vision they shared. Or was there?

Something had changed. Something had changed inside of them all – from Moses and Aaron and others on Mt. Sinai or Gebel Musa -- to Jesus, Peter, John and James on Mt. Tabor.

And, I don't know what it was.

I and other cannot tell you with unanimous certainty that Mt. Sinai, Horeb, or Gebel Musa was where Moses got the commandments or that Mt. Tabor was the place of the Transfiguration. For me, it really doesn't matter. Does that sound bad? Sorry, if it does, but it doesn't.

I do believe that wherever these things or things like them happened, that there was a transcendence, transformation, and transfiguration. I have come to know some of this from my own experience with God and others. It's not all that uncommon, just uncommon that we notice or we talk about it.

I read several accounts of the Transfiguration in preparing for this morning. I came across what is believed to be part of a sermon delivered Ephrem the Syrian, a theologian of the 4th Century, venerated by Christians and a Saint among Syriac Christians. As I read it, I couldn't help being lulled and somewhat comforted by the way it just brought everything together, made it all so simple. Listen to parts of it:

On illumination:

From the land comes the joy of harvest, from the vineyard fruits that give food, and from the Scriptures teaching that gives life. The land has one season for the harvest, and the vineyard has one season for the vintage, but the Scripture when read always overflows with teaching that gives life.

Exegeting the Scriptures on the Transfiguration, Ephraim gives the reasons in why Jesus took the three up the mountain, almost as if he were there. It's that convincing:

1. He led them up the mountain to show them who the Son is and whose he is.

2. He led them up the mountain to show them that he is the Son of God, born from the Father before the ages and in the last times incarnate from the Virgin, as he knows how, born ineffably and without seed, preserving her virginity incorrupt; for wherever God wills it, the order of nature is overcome.
3. He led them up the mountain to show them the glory of the godhead and to make known to them that he is the redeemer of Israel, as he had shown through the Prophets, and they should not be scandalized in him when they saw his voluntary sufferings, which as man he was about to suffer for us. For they knew him as a man, but did not know that he was God.
4. He led them up the mountain and showed them his kingship before his passion, and his power before his death, and his glory before his disgrace, and his honour before his dishonour, so that, when he was arrested and crucified, they might know that he was not crucified through weakness, but willingly by his good pleasure for the salvation of the world.
5. He led them up the mountain and showed the glory of his divinity before the resurrection, so that when he rose from the dead in the glory of his divine nature, they might know that it was not because of his harsh toil that he accepted glory, as if he lacked it, but it was his before the ages with the Father and together with the Father, as he said as he was coming to his voluntary passion, 'Father, glorify me with the glory which I had with you before the world existed'.
6. 'And there appeared to them Moses and Elias talking with him'. And the words that they said to him were such as these: they were thanking him that their words and those of all their fellow Prophets had been fulfilled by his coming. They offered him worship for the salvation which he had wrought for the world for the human race; and that he had fulfilled in reality the mystery they had only sketched. There was joy for the Prophets and the Apostles by this ascent of the mountain.

You know what? When I read this, I wanted every single bit of it to be true, as written. There is, in fact, much of it in which I believe. Yet, there was in the times, the 4th Centruy CE - a time of upheaval and continued formation of the church – that certainty and explanations and, yes, compliance – were demanded. Think of the possibility of certainty in this world – wouldn't it be nice to know the answers – to not have to think, just to know?

Probably, most of us would go crazy, but there is a certain peace to the idea of everything explained and in its place.

And some believe it to be absolutely true as written. From the tablets, to the earthquakes, smoke, burnished and glowing faces, to the voice from heaven. In fact, probably most of us think it true – just true in different ways.

Consider the Transfiguration, the visions, the dreams – with the smoke and earthquake of inner change, rather than physical apparitions or breaks in nature. Consider that our spirit is already a break with the physical nature and that at times (thin places) – that spirit is not encumbered by our self-imposed limitations and it does manifest itself glowingly, brilliantly – sometimes burnished and sometimes brighter than bleached white.

When you have felt this –you know transfiguration – and if others were around – they saw it – or some of it. If you have every felt the great joy, wonder, mystery of any moment in your life – alone or in community, then you know transfiguration, if you have ever felt the sting of tragedy or pain and relied upon God – then you know transfiguration – and somehow, I don't always know how – it has changed you and others.

I believe that spirit-based transfiguration is always an inside job. It is that deep, sudden, whooshing connection between the spirit that resides within us and the great spirit of all. It makes us see differently, more clearly, who our God is, what our purpose is, how this life intersects and joins with others in following the faith traditions we share – the traditions we share – all this is transfiguring. Call it a psychic change, an epiphany, a catharsis – a vision a dream – it's all the mystery of what happens when we get out of the way – or forget ourselves for a moment – and we hit DC Current with the Spirit.

And, we can, if we wish enhance this, encourage this to happen through regular practices or prayer, meditation, community worship and Christian (and other faith traditions') ministries.

I like what poet Galway Kinnel says:

For everything flowers, from within, of self-blessing;
Though sometimes it is necessary
To reteach a thing its loveliness

Sometimes, it is nothing more than remembering that we are a child of God and how lovely that is – even if at the moment it may not seem all that satisfying.

This Ash Wednesday begins our Lenten Season. I have said it before – it is a time in the church year that is the most difficult for me. I can't help it, nor do I necessarily want to – but it is at times a dark and brooding journey, anticipating of the passion of Jesus, his abandonment by the disciples at the foot of the cross. Wondering, "Would I have stayed, would I have run, too." Knowing that his risen Spirit, the Post Easter Jesus – is the transfiguring power in my life today – a power that is greater than described in the Bible and all the events and allegories. A power that is totally encompassing and charged with a direction and unanswerable questions: a call to faith; a call to peace; a call to the Good News.

Ash Wednesday, for me, is the beginning of the trail up that mountain to the moment of heightened memory and transfiguration. As much as it is about remembering the life of Jesus and his teachings, it is more about remembering and living those teachings – with him -- in our lives today.

My goal is to remember that I am at the mountaintop at all times. We are in a thin place and the distance between heaven and earth is thin. It is a place where it is easier to connect with God. We know this place. You may even have a glimpse of it now.

And I like what James Baldwin is quoted as saying in his book: The Next Fire, “Everything now, we must assume, is on our hands; we have no right to assume otherwise.”

To paraphrase that a bit, we the right to assume that God is with us in all ways and all times, transfiguring our lives with light and grace.

Enter it often enough, deeply enough, in community....

Be open to it, let it move about you...

And you will continue to know the transfiguration of Jesus in your company, not just with Moses and Elijah – but with all the angels and the saints – and your heart,
your Eastern heart
will know the voice of God, as well.