

Transfiguration  
St. James-by-the-Sea  
La Jolla  
February 18, 2007

Not so long ago, we celebrated the feast of the Epiphany, a moment of glory that preceded Christ's childhood sorrows. Today, we hear the story of another moment of glory, another Epiphany, which we call the Transfiguration and which precedes a final gathering of storm and darkness before the transfiguring event of the Resurrection. Jesus is on his journey to Jerusalem. He is very aware of his approaching death. What is the connection between—the transfiguration and the agony in the garden? In both cases, Jesus takes the same three people with him—Peter, James and John.

At the Getty museum this past month, looking at the astonishing collection of icons, saved in the dry high deserts of Egypt, I stood before a number of icons depicting the story of today's Gospel.

I stood long before those images and, unlike looking at paintings with a depth perspective that you might step into, these flat icons up and step into your own depth and perceptions. Give them silence and time and they pierce you. I looked. Jesus takes Peter, James and John with him to the top of Mount Tabor. He is preparing them to see an aspect of himself as God, which they don't quite catch. Worse yet, Jesus has been talking about an agony and death that he will face soon and that from death, he will rise again. These guys have to be confused.

Slowly, the three then seem to morph into types of ourselves. Ordinary guys trying to get it, Ordinary guys who don't know why Jesus would have to suffer. Now it's Pete, Jim and Jack on the mountaintop. Without warning, they have this astonishing religious experience; their friend Jesus suddenly becomes luminous and diaphanous; Whiter than snow, Brighter than the sun. The fellow they knew as an ordinary man, this Jesus, is now revealed to them in all the magnificence of the Second Person of the Trinity. Jesus is chatting with Moses and Elijah!

Great, says our impetuous Pete. I like this! Nice piece of real estate. We could build a few condos here and keep this view forever. If Martha were up there she'd say, "Package this in a cute Jam Jar and preserve it!" Before they can say another word, a cloud envelops them and a voice rings out: This is my beloved Son, in whom I delight: Listen to him!"

The boys fall all over themselves. Now they are really frightened. Pete is peeking over his shoulder between spread fingers, Jack, the youngest, so young he is yet beardless--curls into a fetal position. Jim is simply thrown on his back and shielding his eyes, is sliding downhill headfirst.

We look back on our own lives and find certain events that stand out from the rest, "peak experiences" of joy and sorrow, of glory or agony, of ecstasy or despair. In any one of us, there is a Pete, the impulsive one who takes action whenever a crisis occurs; Jim, the one who is shy of the limelight and liable to be found sleeping when action is required; And Jack, the beloved with the unspoiled quality of a child about him who learns about God just by leaning on Jesus. He also nods off in the Garden of Olives but he will waken to the agony of his dear master, even following him to the cross.

But right now, they don't quite get it. They don't know how to handle mystery or the possibility of suffering, or the threat of change.

But Transfiguration, like conversion, means seeing things differently, being open to a new viewpoint, accepting the mystery of life in people and the way of agony that we must all walk with each other. They--and today we--are with Jesus on Mount Tabor so that we might be ready to accept the agony, which we will witness not too many weeks hence on a different mountain, Calvary. Here on this mountaintop let us be awake to witness an Epiphany, so that later, we may not fall asleep in the garden, oblivious to the moment. The power of this experience can sustain us through the darkest moments when things look bleak and hopeless.

At the top of the Icon, I see a great halo around the glowing Jesus. The halo in this case is in the shape of an almond. It is called a mandorla. It envelops Christ. The only way to make the shape of a mandorla is to make two circles overlap. The shape created where circles overlap is a new place. In that place, traditionally the religious experience occurs—when opposites overlap. Right and Left overlap and create a new place where we see something of sacred mystery. It is the luminal, spiritual, paradoxical -- psychological space where transformation happens. Here we don't have control. This is a holy tension. This is our world and heaven overlapping. This is when we resolve for a moment the opposites we so love to cherish. This is where suffering and bad breaks also show us the love of God. This is the moment of defeat and failure when, for a moment we still feel that we are God's beloved children. Right and left, glory and agony, man and woman, yes, republican and democrat, east and west, heaven and earth. The very incarnation of Jesus among us comes from such a marriage of Spirit and matter, God and humankind.

"Listen to him!" calls out the voice. Now the guys are scared. The voice in that cloud frightens them. If you don't get it, listen to him. If you want an answer, listen to him. There is no living forever off peak experiences. You cannot stay on the mountaintop. The glory of Jesus is shown you so that you can go down into the valley again, where the view is limited and the experience of life is real and often just hard. In the trenches—it is the agony of a failed marriage, the death of a beloved spouse, in the disappointment over a child, in the loss of good health, in the agony of aloneness. The mysteries of life and its joys and sorrows envelop as a cloud. And in the very midst of this joy/sorrow overlap, we get a glimpse of God's glory and we are ready to follow him. For Jesus too, the voice of the Father was an unconditional affirming. It will be the strength he needs when he calls out from the cross and the father remains silent.

Our peak experiences might be so simple and real, and yet, we have forgotten them already and never named them: the birth of a baby, the planting of bulbs, the creation of a crusty loaf of bread, a deep conversation over a coffee, the embrace of our beloved, the solution to a crossword puzzle, good hot tears and a belly laugh... Small spurts of the heavenly to encourage us in hard places that lie ahead. I have known myself the odd paradox of losing everything and yet being so fully loved and supported by friends that I hear that voice: this is my beloved child. Through my supportive friends, I know God's affirmation in my very bones.

Transfiguration shows us that the ordinary, if we are not asleep, will suddenly be seen as extraordinary. When that cloudy veil is lifted, we see all of God's children in their glory. In Transfiguration we rejoice in God's people. In Transfiguration, we are touched on the shoulder by Jesus saying: "Get up and do not be afraid. But go back into the valley [of life]—live out that vision which is indeed disguised as your life". An Ah-ha moment is just that. A moment. It fades even as we are trying to hang on to its essence. But that is enough. We have been knocked back and seen Christ--and now, we can REALLY see each other too. Now we can go forth to love and serve the Lord.

-- Gertrud Nelson