SERMON
TRANSFIGURATION SUNDAY – YEAR B
“GLIMPSES OF GLORY”
MARK 9:2-9 / FEBRUARY 11, 2018

Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable to you, O God, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

“Jesus, take us to the mountain, where, with Peter, James, and John, we are dazzled by your glory, light as the blinding sun. There, prepare us for the night, by the vision of that sight.”

These hymn lyrics of Jaroslav Vajda may serve as an introduction to the Gospel story for today popularly called “The Transfiguration.” Undoubtedly, we have before us an occurrence of unscientific proportions. The Latin fathers who saw it that way named this event *mysterium tremendum* – “tremendous mystery,” and aptly so. Its language is so very lofty and beyond rational construct.

Located on a mountain top, this summit-with-God experience is told in the three Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke with few differences. All use words that electrify – dazzling white clothing and a transfigured appearance. Transfiguration literally means to change figure or form. It comes from the same root word meaning ‘metamorphosis’. Jesus’ appearance was changed or perhaps more accurately he was seen differently – another aspect of his reality, of his identity, was glimpsed, shining forth in a mysterious way to the three disciples present with him.
And then a visitation by ‘the greats’ of past salvation history, and a divine voice that penetrates the clouds are all used to describe this event. If you are trying to figure out this story, as our western contemporary minds are inclined to do, forget it. The transfiguration is more about ‘truth’ and less about tangible verities. This momentous happening wherein Christ is magnified and glorified cannot be expressed or walled-in by factual data. It is truly a *mysterium tremendum*.

The story of the transfiguration of Jesus is an invitation to a certain way of seeing. As we respond to this invitation and begin to focus through the lens of this amazing narrative, we might find ourselves reflecting on how we view the world, life, God and much more. Annie Dillard, the engaging poet and naturalist, takes us into the world of Tinker Creek. It is a marvelous adventure of discovery and joy. The creek is so filled with life and movement.

She writes, “Darkness appalls and light dazzles; the scrap of visible light that doesn’t hurt my eyes, hurts my brain. What I see sets me swaying. Size and distance and the sudden swelling of meaning confuse me, bowl me over. I straddle the sycamore log bridge over Tinker Creek in the summer. I look at the lighted creek bottom: Snail tracks tunnel the mud in quavering curves. A crayfish jerks, but by the time I absorb what has happened, he’s gone in a billowing smokescreen of silt. I look at the water: minnows and shiners.... I look at the water’s surface: skaters, bubbles, and leaves sliding down. Suddenly, my own face, reflected, startles me witless.
Those snails have been tracking my face! Finally, with a shuddering wrench of the will, I see the clouds, cirrus clouds. I'm dizzy. I fall in. This looking business is risky.” Annie Dillard’s transfiguration experience.

Theologian William Willimon sees this story of the transfiguration as a parable of the church; of us – especially of us on Sunday mornings at worship. While the act of worship may help us find out where we’re going wrong in life and help us live a better life; while it may encourage us and challenge us to be people of justice and peace, kindness and love; while it may be a means of establishing caring connection with one another, of forming community – I don’t believe, as important as these things are, that they are the heart of worship.

The heart of worship is to be, to simply be, in the loving presence of God, accepting the invitation of God and open to the power of God to see life and the world and one another and even ourselves ‘differently’ – as ‘transfigured’, each of us glowing brightly as we see each other as made in God’s image, as beloved children of God, as brothers and sisters in Christ. I have glimpsed on occasion, myself, the divine glory of lives transformed; or those wonderful, delicious moments in worship when we rise above our busyness, our troubles, our worries, our plans and projects, when we are taken to the mountaintop. In such moments, we are given a new perspective.

In such moments – in the church, and in the life God has given us outside the church – we are called to simply enjoy it, to bask in the mystery of the presence of the divine. Irenaeus, an early church leader, spoke of these
peak experiences when he said, “The glory of God is a human being fully alive.” Certainly, it has been my observation that church, at its best, helps us to be – even if momentarily – fully alive.

When a person joins a church – especially by profession of faith, as Doug has – that can be a mountaintop experience. And in transferring their membership to Augustine, Larry and Lorraine may be reminded of their mountaintop experiences. As we share in the liturgy with them and then welcome them into our church as full members we see them differently and they us. We get a glimpse of our humanity becoming fully alive. We catch sight of the mystery of God’s glory being expressed through them – as unique and cherished persons within God’s human creation. And we are reminded that we, all of the rest of us, are also unique and cherished persons within God’s human creation. All of this we glimpse as we celebrate their being part of the body of Christ in this place and time. It is a transfiguration moment.

In our Gospel lesson this morning, after the disciples glimpse the glory of God to be found in Christ, the story takes a dramatic shift. For while Jesus takes his disciples with him up the mountain, after the period of transfiguration, they come back down again. They come back down – down into the mundane nature of everyday life; down into the nitty-gritty details of misunderstanding, squabbling, disbelieving disciples; down into the religious and political quarrels of the day; down into the jealousies and rivalries both small and enormous that colour our relationships; down into the poverty and pain that are part and parcel of our life in this world. Down.
Yes, the disciples come down, but most importantly Jesus comes down with them. He comes to be with us in our brokenness, fear, disappointment, and loss. And, of course, it only gets more so, as soon we will watch our saviour travel to the cross.

There he will embrace all that is difficult, agonizingly difficult, and even despicable in life in order that we might live knowing that wherever we may go, and whatever our life circumstances may become; somehow that mysterious glory, perhaps not visible in the same way, is there, is there – all the same, to bring hope where there is despair, light where there is darkness, and life where there is death.

As we catch glimpses of glory in our mountain top experiences we are to connect those experiences of splendour with the valley below, with the world of every day. This can happen even in the valley of the shadow of death. Our mountaintop experiences of faith help us to see glimpses of glory sent to us in the valley.

Like the glimpse a woman once had as a young man she knew well took his last breath while laying in a hospital bed – the light in the room subdued – the window next to him revealing a grey, nondescript sky. And then abruptly, and shockingly a bright ray of sunshine broke through the heavy clouds, and shone directly through that window, illuminating the room and all of us there with a peculiar glory.

It was a moment in which the man who had just died and all of us who stood in that room beside him were – transfigured. And this grieving woman
cried out in anguish and joy; anguished in the keen pain of losing a loved one; joyously because she knew she had caught a glimpse of glory; a glimpse of a mysterious reality; a marvelous truth, beyond rational thought and scientific analysis; yet real, so real – all the same.

There is much mystery in today’s Gospel reading. Of mystery in the Bible, one commentator has written:

“Let me put it like this. I’ve mentioned my marriage partner, the best anyone ever had. We have fought a good deal over the past years. There have been times I have wanted to strangle my partner and many more times, I’m sure, my partner has wanted to put poison in my coffee, but on the whole and by and large, we’ve had a wonderful marriage. And we are much more in love than we were at the time of our wedding.

I want to tell you about my partner, so that you would know that person as I know that person. I could have biologists write books about the physical traits of my beloved – things about body chemistry, size, shape, and identify the mole on my partner’s left shoulder blade. I could have a psychologist write an in-depth analysis of my loved one’s personality and the way our minds work in relation to one another. A biographer could write a history of my partner. An artist could paint a picture and perhaps come a little closer. But there’s no way to know my beloved partner except in the way I know.

But the closest way of knowing in the way that I do would be to have a poet write about my partner, because the essential quality of my beloved is not
anything material or intellectual or even psychological. It is mystical; it is mystery, and anyone who has ever been in love knows that. The Bible is a love story. Just as my partner and I have had many a falling out, God and God’s people had many a falling out. But the love has endured. It is better read, then, as an effort of people who were in love to tell someone else about the love they feel and the person they love. It is inevitable that from time to time they fall into poetry. So much of the Bible has to be read and understood as poetry because you miss the point otherwise.”

The transfiguration of Jesus is poetry; not necessarily factual, but truthful. It is about a way of seeing; a way of knowing; a way of relating – a *mysterium tremendum* – that reveals more about truth than about tangible verities. Below the mountain, in shadow and wilderness, the world waits. Pain, despair, and longing are there. But, somewhere, too, there is a place for us, a place where God is, connecting us not only to the light but also to brokenness, and struggle.

As the season of epiphany gives up its light for the shadows of lent, may the glory of God’s presence continue to shine on us. Amen.

*Major Sources:*


February 12, 2012.