

Last Epiphany B
St. John's Cathedral
Feb. 11, 2018

I was having some trepidation earlier this week about this sermon. It wasn't that I don't like the text. Actually the Transfiguration is one of my favorite stories. It was that I have probably preached on it between 20 and 30 times. But I wondered if I had anything new to say about it. This is a common issue with people who have been preaching for a long time – even with texts that are close to their hearts.

This is really a text that connects us with all kinds of things – surprise, glory, power, insight – and more. It is a life changing experience for a small inner circle of disciples who go on a hike with Jesus up a mountain and there see him in a new way – transfigured. Changed from the ordinary guy they were hanging out with into a numinous figure – glorified in appearance and accompanied by Moses and Elijah – two incredible heroes of the past. Prophetic figures. And then, out of the cloud, came God's voice: This is my Son, the beloved; listen to him."

And then it was over. Just as mysteriously as it began.

What are we to do with this? Where does it take us?

In the cycle of readings over the past few weeks, each of which has revealed Jesus as Lord in some way (healing, teaching, preaching, calling disciples), it is sort of the capstone of all of these texts – the one that shows, in this mystical moment, the glorified Jesus. And it had to be a life-changer for those three disciples who would carry this experience with them in their memories and in their hearts from then on. It changed them.

I think there are moments of transfiguration in our lives, too. Moments that surprise and enlighten us. Moments that are mystery-filled and infused with the power of God. Moments that inform us – and stay in our hearts forever. What I want to do today is share a couple of real stories from my own life that have been moments of transfiguration. The transfiguration of Jesus happened on that mountaintop in Galilee a long time ago, but experiences of transfiguration do not end there. The United Church of Christ used to say in its promotional material, “God is still speaking.” And so here are a couple of ways that I heard God speaking to me in a powerful way.

The first one happened about 30 years ago. I was ordained and had been a deacon for about five years and was wrestling with whether I might be called to the priesthood. There were many reasons why answering a call to the priesthood seemed both impossible and impractical. For one, the rector of my parish opposed the ordination of women – something that was still pretty common in the early 1980s. There was only one woman priest in our diocese at the time. Another was that I was a single parent with two children – not the most practical situation to be moving to seminary life. There were a thousand other questions and doubts, but the urge to consider this call persisted.

That spring I was attending our annual clergy conference at Camp Field near Leavenworth. Camp Field was an amazing place with cabins scattered through the pines, mountains rising up and, best of all, the Icicle River rushing through a canyon.

One afternoon during our free time I went alone to the river bank and sat down in the warm sunshine, sort of pondering all of the complicated feelings I was having

about the future. I remember feeling sleepy as I sat listening to the river pounding against the rocks. I closed my eyes for a while, but was awakened by a voice (which I presume was the voice of God). That voice said something like “It will be fine. Don’t worry.”

It was a little like Julian of Norwich, proclaiming “All shall be well.” This was an assurance that my vocational struggles would get sorted out in a good way. It gave me the courage to invite my reluctant rector out to lunch to see if we could work something out that would not compromise his strong feelings. And we did.

But in the bigger picture, that experience was about much, much more. It was a reassurance that God was with me – especially in those times when I felt very alone and very perplexed. That I was not alone, bashing away at things that were very difficult and complicated. I guess you could say that I came down from that particular mountain with some new insight – some new strength – to meet the future. I have certainly called upon that memory more than once.

The second experience happened a in Cuernavaca, Mexico, where I ws studying Spanish for a few weeks.

This was in the days when many of us still used travelers’ cheques, particularly in a place like Cuernavaca where ATMs were few and far between. One afternoon I had to go to the bank to get some cash. I felt the crunch of time, knowing that it was a tight squeeze to walk to the bank, cash the check and then meet my ride back to where I was staying.

First My friend and I discovered that banking in Mexico is a slow process. You stand in line first to get your check approved before going to the teller. Unfortunately that was the same bank employee who approved car loans, mortgages and other time-consuming processes and there were people ahead of us. Add to that the Mexican custom of visiting a lot during those transactions. Everyone seemed to be having a lot of fun while I was looking at my watch.

When we finally got our checks approved and moved into the teller line I was feeling better. That was, until there was a power outage at the bank. The lights went off. The computers went dead. The electronic lock on the front door clicked and we were trapped in the semi-darkness. I could feel my blood pressure rising. Americans (especially this one) are not too good at patience.

But no one either on the bank staff or among the customers seemed to mind. This was an opportunity more than an inconvenience. People began visiting with one another. The tellers grabbed soft drinks. Young people flirted. Moms played with their children. A good time was had by all. No one was looking at the clock (which had also stopped.)

And in the midst of all that, there was an epiphany for me. And it had to do with God's time and the gift of time. It had something to do with relationships being more important than punctuality. It had to do with the futility of getting stressed about things that were beyond my control. In a nutshell, it was sort of a 'let go, let God' moment. And there was a kind of holiness about it. No clouds or claps of thunder or visions of glory, but a holy moment in the middle of a Mexican bank. I can't say that I

am healed of impatience, but I have this moment in my memory and in my heart to open up other possibilities. And I am grateful.

Three of Jesus' friends went on a mountain hike with him one day and their experience on that mountain changed them. It opened them to a new way of looking at Jesus. Knowing Jesus. Opened them to new possibilities. Strengthened them for the journey ahead.

My hunch is that most of us have had a moment of transfiguration or two in our faith journeys and will have others. They are holy moments that move from the ordinary to the extraordinary.

God is still speaking. Our job is to pay attention.