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Grace Cathedral, San Francisco, CA Y7
Last Sunday after the Epiphany (Year B) 11:00 a.m. Eucharist
Sunday 11 February 2018

2 Kings 2:1-12
Psalm 50:1-6
2 Cor. 4:3-6
Mark 9:2-9

Always Transfiguring

"Then Peter said to Jesus, "Rabbi, it is good for us to be here..." (Mark 9)

1. "Do what you can, with what you have, where you are." As the Olympian Lowell Bailey looks down the cross-country skiing course before the biathlon he repeats these words from Teddy Roosevelt to calm himself and to prepare. Immediately before the start he imagines being an arrow fitted into a flexed bow ready to be shot.¹

Where do you go in your imagination to seek peace or find strength? Sometimes I imagine the snow falling and the sound of the wind against the storm windows of the little second floor apartment where we lived in Cambridge as graduate students. Inspired by a Chinese martial arts film we named that place "Happy Woods."

I feel the same way about Grace Cathedral. I always picture it in my mind's eye with the light filtering in on a Sunday morning just like this. In Peter's words "it is good to be here." I wonder if later when times got hard, Peter, James and John remembered that time on the mountain when they saw Jesus transfigured before them and talking to Elijah and Moses.

When I was a young child I liked to sit halfway up the stairs.² The world looked different from that vantage point. Perhaps I appreciated lingering a little in a place that most people just passed by without thinking.

Today we as stand in a similar place in the church calendar between Epiphany and Lent. Through Epiphany the truth of Jesus became more fully revealed each week. During Lent, if we do it right, we will learn who *we* are when we stand before God. Some try to accomplish this by abstaining from alcohol, drugs, caffeine or sugar. Others do it through additional prayer disciplines, the service of others or by changing their daily habits. I'm leading a Monday night Bible Study for people whose Lenten discipline is attending more thoughtfully to God's Word.

2. John structures his gospel around increasingly powerful signs that Jesus is the Son of God. These begin with the way Jesus changes water into wine at a wedding in Cana of Galilee and lead up to reviving Jesus' dead friend Lazarus. John does this to establish that Jesus is the Son of God and that he is a new kind of Messiah.

Mark takes a different approach. Instead of increasingly significant signs, Mark reveals the truth of Jesus all at once in an incandescent moment on a mountaintop. We call it the Transfiguration. The Greek word *metamorphoō* or *metamorphosis* means to change form (Mk. 9:2).

The transfiguration occurs at the midpoint of Mark's Gospel. If we take the last place named as a likely nearby location (Caesarea Philippi), this would put them on Mount Hermon, the highest peak in Syro-Palestine.³ Psalm 133 mentions it. "How very good and pleasant it is when kindred live together in unity... It is like the dew of Hermon, which falls on the mountains of Zion."⁴

Two weeks ago I talked about the deeper structures of Mark (the chiasmus in Mark 1:21-8).⁵ For him the Transfiguration functions as a kind of hinge or fulcrum, a bridge between the two movements of his great symphony.⁶

In the ascending first eight chapters Mark writes about the surprising healing and liberation that people experience in Jesus. Jesus undoes even the damage we cause ourselves through our inmost thoughts. In the midst of our blindness to our real situation, he makes us see again.

The last eight chapters describe Jesus' descent. They show the suspicion, fear and alienation of the authorities who condemn him. They describe the experience of being abandoned by your friends and then suffering torture and death.

Between these two movements we have the Transfiguration. Again the context matters, it follows perhaps the most difficult and disturbing teaching in the Bible. When Jesus plainly describes the way he will suffer and die Peter tries to convince him to take another path. Jesus says, "if any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me" (Mk. 8:34). In the Transfiguration we see one of the ways that God gets us through the darkest points of our lives.

The structure of Mark, with the transfiguration at its apex also helps us to imagine a different kind of Messiah. The old messiahs were conquering generals who cast out the occupying armies and liberated their peoples with the sword. They were the guys in the white hats and yet not much different from their violent adversaries. In contrast, Jesus, the beloved of God, is a gentle Messiah. His suffering and death undoes the absolute power of death forever.

The point of all this is not to convince you about something that happened in the past. Mark wants you to understand the mystery of Jesus as the Messiah and to experience Christ's presence in your life now.

Imagine Elisha following the prophet Elijah from our story in Second Kings as other prophets tell him that the Lord will soon take his friend (2 Kings 2). We walk with Jesus in the same way. Watching what he does, imitating him, praying and gathering together as he taught us, this all leads us to we experience God in the way that Jesus does – as beloved children responding in gratitude to our benevolent father.

Imagine Peter and James and John walking with their friend into the scrublands, and cold mists of Mt. Hermon... They walk up into the clouds and into the most profound spiritual experience of their lives. God draws back the curtain of creation. They encounter a kind of freedom from the ordinary rules of time and space. The world shines with the brightness of heaven.

Moses who "knew God face to face" (Deut. 34:10), and Elijah who heard God in "the sound of sheer silence" (1 Kings 19), he was the prophet who never died – these two talk with their friend Jesus. Peter feels both terrified and compelled to respond (Mark uses the Greek word *apokritheis* which means to answer or reply, Mk. 9:5). No one has ever given me a satisfactory explanation of his behavior, but he offers to build three shrines (or tents or dwellings). He seems to be trying to domesticate or perpetuate this moment, this glimpse of perfection, this experience of heaven. Saying, "it is good for us to be here," seems like the greatest understatement in history.

In an instant these ordinary blundering men become like the spiritual legends. God speaks to them. "This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him" (Mk. 9)! And God speaks to us also.

3. Mircea Eliade (1907-1986) taught at the University of Chicago and was one of the twentieth century's most famous scholars of religion. He believed that a theophany, the revelation of God, was essential for giving structure and orientation to the world.⁷ This experience of the Holy One establishes a sacred order and gives a pattern essential for human flourishing.

I have talked about how the Transfiguration does this, how it can open a door to experiencing the ongoing presence of Christ. Meeting God in this way gives us the miraculous power to take up our own cross and follow him. With God's help we can live more often in this experience of unity with the Divine. One of the primary mottos of the Protestant Reformation was "Ecclesia semper reformanda." It is Latin and means that the

church is always reforming. I wonder if we can live in a way that we can always see the world being transfigured by God (Semper Transfiguro).

On those snowy days back when I lived in that little Cambridge apartment I used to take my toddler son to the library where we would pick out music recordings. One day we brought back the composer Philip Glass' (1937-) opera *Einstein on the Beach*. I had never heard anything like it. At the beginning of his career people felt offended by the strangeness of his music as if the composer were toying with them. They even sought to disrupt his concerts.⁸ I didn't know at all what to think of it at first, with its repetitions and the strange overtones and beats that suddenly arise. But it opened a door for me into a form of music that I now love.

In his memoir Glass writes about the way that music provokes what he calls epiphanies or experiences of transcendence. We get easily get caught up in the technique of art without fully realizing its central role in changing the way we perceive the world. He writes, "Drawing is about seeing, dancing is about moving, writing... is about speaking, and music is about hearing... I realized that music training was absolutely about learning to hear – going completely past everyday listening." For me living is about praying as we give thanks for God's gifts in every moment of our awareness.

The twentieth century poet from Carmel Robinson Jeffers (1887-1962) finds a similar transforming experience in paying close attention to nature. He writes, "Climb the great ladder out of the pit of yourself and man. / Things are so beautiful, your love will follow you eyes."⁹

In a passage I have used for meditation St. Augustine writes, "Imagine if all the tumult of the body were to quiet down, along with our busy thoughts about earth, sea, and air; if the very world should stop, and the mind cease thinking about itself, go beyond itself and be quite still... so that we should hear... [God] the very Self which in all... things we love."¹⁰

I began by asking where you go to find peace and strength. It is good to be here, halfway up the stairs between Epiphany and Lent. Your life does not need to be perfect to see God happening all around us. The world looks transfigured to those who see through the eyes of faith. During this Holy Lent I invite you to see how Christ is traveling with you, how God is transfiguring your life. "Do what you can, with what you have, where you are."

#PhilipGlass, #Transfiguration, #RobinsonJeffers, #EknathEaswaran, #truth

¹ Margaret Cheatham Williams, Alexandra Garcia and Andrew Khosravani, "Before the Gun at a Biathlon Race," *The New York Times*, 10 February 2018

² "Halfway up the stairs

Isn't up and isn't down

It isn't in the nursery

And it isn't in the town..."

A. A. Milne, "Halfway Down"

³ Liz and Matt Boulton, "Transfiguration: SALT's Commentary for Epiphany Week 6," *SALT* 6 February 2018. <http://www.saltproject.org/progressive-christian-blog/2018/2/6/transfiguration-lectionary-commentary-for-epiphany-week-6>.

⁴ "For there the Lord ordained his blessing, life forevermore" (Psalm 133).

⁵ 4 Epiphany (1-28-18) B

⁶ Liz and Matt Boulton, "Transfiguration: SALT's Commentary for Epiphany Week 6," *SALT* 6 February 2018. <http://www.saltproject.org/progressive-christian-blog/2018/2/6/transfiguration-lectionary-commentary-for-epiphany-week-6>.

⁷ Eliade most often wrote about hierophanies (a theophany is one kind of hierophany). Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane* (NY: Harcourt, 1957).

⁸ Philip Glass, *Words Without Music: A Memoir* (NY: Norton, 2015) 251, 228, 244.

⁹ "Climb the great ladder out of the pit of yourself and man. / Things are so beautiful, your love will follow you eyes; / Things are the God, you will love God and not in vain, / For what we love, we grow to it, we share its nature. At length / You will look back along the stars' rays and see that even / The poor doll humanity has its place under heaven..." Robinson Jeffers, "Sign-Post," *The Selected Poetry of Robinson Jeffers* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2001) 504.

¹⁰ Eknath Easwaran, *Timeless Wisdom: Passages for Meditation from the World's Saints and Sages* (Petaluma, CA: Nilgiri Press) 145.