

## A GLIMPSE OF GLORY

Sermon on the transfiguration by the Rev. Keenan Colton Kelsey  
Noe Valley Ministry Presbyterian Church (USA) February 3, 2008

Text: Matthew 17:1-9 Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and his brother John and led them up a high mountain, by themselves. And he was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became dazzling white. Suddenly there appeared to them Moses and Elijah, talking with him. Then Peter said to Jesus, 'Lord, it is good for us to be here; if you wish, I will make three dwellings here, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.' While he was still speaking, suddenly a bright cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud a voice said, 'This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!' When the disciples heard this, they fell to the ground and were overcome by fear. But Jesus came and touched them, saying, 'Get up and do not be afraid.' And when they looked up, they saw no one except Jesus himself alone. As they were coming down the mountain, Jesus ordered them, 'Tell no one about the vision until after the Son of Man has been raised from the dead.'

THE STORY OF THE TRANSFIGURATION is a mysterious, mystical, enigmatic anomaly -- one which can scarcely be believed. If it is to be taken literally, we are here face to face with the totally supernatural.

It starts simply enough. Jesus wants to pray. He is coming face to face with his own death. Much as Martin Luther King Jr. knew that his actions put him in grave political danger, so too did Jesus. He is beginning to feel the inevitable direction and destiny of his journey. It is no wonder he wants to go up the mountain to get away from the crowds. And just as we often have our own prayer circles or covenant groups, he invites his closest friends, his inner circle, Peter, James, and John.

We are not told whether the disciples question Jesus or simply follow. We don't know whether they are eager or merely compliant. We don't know whether they were bounding exuberantly up the mountain, -- or trudging stoically, traipsing solemnly, stumbling over rocks as they scurry after Jesus.

They reach a good height.... the ground is falling away beneath them in the gathering dusk... they round a corner, perhaps pushing a branch aside, and look up in time to see Jesus begin to glow: From the inside out, his being changes. Even his garments glisten dazzlingly white! Their teacher is radiant, iridescent, carrying joy like a flaming sun in his hands. They look on dumbfounded. Every line of the picture portrays divine glory! Then, in a blink, they see Moses and Elijah talking with him -- Moses the lawgiver and Elijah the prophet. Could this really be the dusty dogged rabbi they have been following in and out of towns, through outlying lands? The one who has been healing the lame, eating with tax collectors and debating with women, touching lepers, begging meals and lodging? Was it hallucination?

The Gospel lesson paints a picture of something ... unearthly ... unimaginable .... unexplainable. Or is it?

A bride is said to glow, to sparkle, with happiness and beauty. A soldier, stepping off the plane from Iraq and into his fiancée's arms relaxes, even rejoices, as months of despair and exhaustion slip away. A new mother, just out of difficult labor, is handed her newborn child, and she radiates a love and awe even greater than her happy expectant days of pregnancy. Or imagine the face of someone listening to sublime music... or watching the pounding of the surf and majesty of the waves. Every once and so often something so touching, so incandescent, so alive, transfigures the human face.

It is like being in a cathedral just before dawn. The first sunray reaches the stain glass windows and a dark wall becomes a vivid tapestry. That's what a transfiguration is like - an influx of wonder, of beauty, of love, of exhilaration, of God

We can imagine transfiguration. It is not supernatural.

Nor is the response of the disciples unusual. Peter's first reaction, after finding his voice, was to blurt out an offer to set up shelters for this awesome trio: " Let us stay here," he said.

And why not? Don't we all want to hold on to a vision, a mountaintop experience?

Remember Tara Lipinski? In 1998, at the age of 15, she became the youngest gold medalist in the history of the Olympic Winter Games. After the medal ceremony, she said, "I was almost a little sad knowing I was going to have to get off the podium. It felt so good, so perfect. I thought it was a great night. I plan to enjoy it for the rest of my life."

We can relate to Tara's reluctance for after all, she had dreamed of the moment for her whole life. She had sacrificed and struggled and worked for it. Likewise we empathize with Peter. Here was a messiah he understood, enthroned in brilliance, speaking with prophets of old. He wanted to live in that moment of clarity and glory forever. He wanted to build monuments to the glory.

But Peter forgot, atop the mountain, that God cannot be boxed and held -- that the rainbow only lasts for so long, -- that a spectacular sunrise can never be duplicated. So God had to remind him. In mid-sentence, Peter was interrupted by an overshadowing presence, God in a cloud, God in a thick silent darkness dancing over the light, A voice boomed from nowhere and everywhere, "This is my beloved my chosen my child. Listen to him!" It seemed to say, take heart from the vision, and listen to Jesus who is God on earth.

Was the voice real or imagined? For the disciples, it was real. Finally, after years of being with Jesus,. Peter James and John saw -- and heard—a deep unvarnished fantastic truth . For hours or perhaps only seconds the darkness covered them and the deepest

places hidden within were pulled out, turned, and put back. Nothing had changed, yet everything had changed. They heard the inevitability of the cross, and the greater glory afterward. A glimpse of glory unveiled the new order, but not what they had expected. What a revelation!

Jesus was transfigured. The disciples were transformed. You see, transfiguration, any transfiguration, is an event. The Greek word, *metamorphootherai*, occurs only in the passive voice. It is a change in the outward appearance that happens to you. You can't make it happen; you can only allow it to happen.

For Jesus, as for Moses in the Hebrew text, this change in appearance was God's signature on his choice and commitment. It didn't change Jesus. But it changed Peter and James and John. Transfiguration, like beauty, is in the eye of the beholder. Transformation, however, is something that happens when someone sees.

These glimpses of glory are God breaking into our world. It was Jesus' acceptance of God's grace and God's will that allowed him to become a transparent window luminous with God's love. These glimpses startle us. They also inspire us and sustain us.

In the gospel story today, Jesus and his disciples do not stay on the mountain. This event marks the first clear decisive step of the road to Calvary. Silently they followed the teacher away from the hill, away from the light, away from the prophets, away from the voice. Away from, or was it toward? They were never sure.

Wednesday is Ash Wednesday. As we ourselves stand on the threshold of Lent, we not only remember Christ's struggles, we remember our own. We each have our own roads toward Calvary. But buoyed and girded by the same vision that buoyed and girded the disciples, the journey will be easier, the end more certain.

I know that this is true because the vision of transfiguration that I hold on to, is my own Mother's face. She died 15 years ago, stricken with cancer and debilitated with dementia. She was old beyond her years; she had lost her hair from chemotherapy and was in some pain. But when out of the confusion and disorientation of her last months, she recognized me, or she heard the laughter of her grandchildren, she lit up! Her eyes laughed and her skin glowed and her smile was broad. Years dropped away. For that moment she was truly alive. She felt joy and radiated love. Those moments passed for her. But they live with me forever. The profound transfiguration rescues me from anguish, reconnects me with her vitality, let me move on, secure in the legacy of her love. I have new insights about the elderly and the ill about the process of dying, insights I carry into my own ministry. I was and continue to be transformed.

The Biblical image of Christian living is one of pilgrimage. The authentic vision on the mountain should always lead to authentic transformation in the valley. Lent calls us to follow Jesus back into the valleys of daily life. Sir Edmund Hillary was the first person to stand on the summit of Mt. Everest. He was knighted for this; he is immortalized in history for the achievement.

He writes of it in terms of luminescence, a holy vision. But he was accompanied by a native Sherpa guide. And after that mountaintop experience, he spent the next 30 plus years in the foothills of Everest, in Nepal, working with the Sherpa's, whom he had come to love, respect, admire. He established an on-going trust for Sherpa welfare. He created a hospital and helped build 22 schools where there were none.

The wonderful thing about this is, as we let those moments of wonder and love work on us, we not only become transformed, we open up the way to be transfigured ourselves, to be visibly changed by letting in the love and light of our God. Then we become part of the cycle, the vehicle of passing on opportunities for others to be transformed. This is, my friends, the work of the church. We journey to Jerusalem together, in a cycle of transfiguration and transformation.

May it be so.