

“IN THE PRESENCE OF THE HOLY”

Matthew 16:24-28; 17:1-8

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This Wednesday marks the beginning of Lent in the Church year, a time when we are most focused on our walk with Jesus. The Sunday before Lent, we always read the strange story of the transfiguration. For some reason, the lectionary committee gives us this last vision of Jesus' glory before we begin the challenging task of following Jesus to Jerusalem.

And we know that it will be difficult because Jesus has just said, “If any want to become my followers, they must deny themselves, take up their cross and follow me.” Jesus must know that the disciples will be tempted to stray from this path of discipleship, for he reminds them that there is glory, there is life beyond the cross. He tells the disciples that some will not taste death before “before they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom.”

It's this last comment that sets the stage for that holy encounter on the mountain that we call the transfiguration. They are given six days, we are given six days to ponder his words. No other teaching, no healing, and no miracle interrupts the flow from these words to the glory revealed in Jesus as he talks with Moses and Elijah. Six days of silence, a little walking, and arrival at the sacred site makes it sound like a pilgrimage.

And Peter wants to turn it into that. Something extraordinary has happened. They have encountered the holy presence of God. So as people do when they encounter the sacred, Peter wants to mark the place for others who might pass this way. We aren't told whether Jesus approves of this, or whether Peter in fact built the shrine. The matter gets dropped when the cloud appears and the voice bears witness to Jesus. And then the whole thing is over. Jesus tells them to get up and stop trembling; and everything is as it was before.

It's interesting that Jesus tells them not to be afraid. Fear or awe seems to belong to the experience of most people when they encounter the sacred. Phil Cousineau writes in *The Art of Pilgrimage*, “Ancient wisdom suggests if you aren't trembling as you approach the sacred, it isn't the real thing, The sacred, in its various guises as holy ground, art, or knowledge, evokes emotion *and* commotion” (p. xxvii).

Sacred encounters do shake us up, cause a commotion in our souls. They change the way we look at things. I haven't had visions like the disciples do here. But I felt the presence of the holy many years ago when I explored caves with the Boy Scouts or friends. Crawling through a tight space and imagining the tons of rock above you can send a panic through your body. Sitting for a while with the flashlights off and experiencing the deep darkness of a cave becomes unsettling. But it's not just dread that fills your mind, there's this sense that here is a world you knew nothing about, a world so utterly different from the ordinary human life, a power beyond your imagining. There's a sacred

beauty to a place where drops of water carve out enormous caverns and create the most unusual formations.

I get a similar feeling when looking out over the bay and ocean from one of the peaks in Acadia National Park or seeing the canyons in Zion or Bryce this past fall. I feel the presence of the holy when seeing a bird for the first time, even seeing one as if for the first time. Nature is for many people replete with a sacred presence. These experiences are not like the disciple's, but they do bring an awareness of the glory of God.

When nature preserves are treated as dumping grounds or a large section of woods replaced by houses or acres of land are reshaped to extract natural resources, I feel as though we have covered over God's glory. But even here in the "groaning" of creation, we can hear a "word" from the Lord that changes how we look at things.

But the experience of Peter, James, and John is not so subtle. The glory that they witness has little to do with the natural world. Jesus is transfigured before their eyes. They see people who died long ago. If they thought Jesus had some holy connection to God before, there is little doubt now. And yet Jesus seems to minimize the experience. He tells them to pick their jaws up off the ground and to be on their way. They see Jesus in his glory, but it is a very ordinary Jesus that leads them to Jerusalem. Having seen the glory, they must now discover the sacred in the ordinary.

I've never had an experience even remotely resembling the transfiguration. Most people don't. Most of us discover the holy in the ordinary events of life. When I'm writing a sermon, a moment often comes when the message takes shape. Something shifts in how I see the text or how I see it speaking to our context. Sometimes that moment doesn't happen, but after the preaching, someone will say how meaningful it was to them. The sacred can be present in the writing and the hearing. When a group studies the scripture, the insight that changes a text for us can come from anyone. It seems to emerge from the conversation.

The presence of the holy is felt in our thoughts and prayers, as we listen to and speak to one another, and as we carry out ministries of compassion. It comes in the hearing and the doing. People from Westminster have encountered the holy while serving meals at Ministry with Community, while visiting with our friends in Perico, Cuba, and while purchasing gifts for the children of people incarcerated. The followers of Jesus recognize the presence of the Holy in the memorials left at the site of George Floyd's murder, in the efforts to address the housing crisis, and in countless actions taken to protect and restore the environment. Anything that changes how we see and act for our neighbor marks the presence of the holy.

We are, as disciples of Jesus, on our way to Jerusalem. We take this pilgrimage every year. Jesus tells us that this means denying oneself, looking to the interests of others, and taking up our cross, resisting the forces of death that destroy the glory of God in creation and among people.

Phil Cousineau wrote: "In each of us dwells a wanderer, a gypsy, a pilgrim. ... What matters most on your journey is how deeply you see, how attentively you hear, how richly the encounters are felt in your heart and soul" (p. xxix). We are not likely to see Jesus transfigured before us, but if we are paying attention, the holy is more easily seen in the ordinary. So "get up," there are marvels to be seen and heard on this journey of faith. The holy waits only for our ears to be unstopped and our eyes to be opened and our hearts unlocked. We may not see Jesus transfigured, but perhaps we, ourselves, will be transformed more into the image of the one we follow, Jesus Christ. Amen.