

Transfiguration, Year B, 2015

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If you've ever felt really alone in your life, today's Gospel is for you. If you've ever been depressed or scared or hopeless, today's gospel is for you. I think for a lot of people, they read the transfiguration of Jesus and see that he is glittering on the mountain top and they are awed by his power. And that's OK. Jesus is God and it does physically show in today's story... but today is not about sparkle or getting the warm and fuzzies from our creator. Today is about being introduced to the real God, not the one that we have created in our minds—the one that grants wishes and swoops in to save us from anything bad.

I think the Pharisees were so bothered by Jesus not so much because they found him to be irreverent and offensive, but because he didn't look like what they expected him to look like. The Jewish people had been waiting their whole life for the messiah. They envisioned that this messiah would come into the world and rescue them from their lives. They believed there would be no more pain. They believed the kingdom of heaven would be easy to spot. But then Jesus shows up and people are starting to say that he is the messiah. And yet, they have not been rescued. Their darkest fears still remain. There is still hunger and sickness and pain... and they're mad. The messiah they had been waiting for has arrived... and he's not what they expected.

I think we as Christians do the exact same thing. We expect that if we say our prayers, give money to charity, respect others, and generally behave like decent people; God won't let bad things happen to us. And yet, sometimes we find ourselves alone in our rooms at night, completely unable to sleep because we feel

so alone. Because there is so much to worry about still and because while we know there is a God and we believe that God is good, we sometimes can't quite grasp that string that connects us to our creator and we begin to doubt that good, real God.

I remember when I was in seminary; I was in a bit of a dark place. The church was beginning to feel constrictive and I was becoming disillusioned. There was a good bit of nastiness going on in the church regarding the treatment of my gay brothers and sisters and so I called my bishop, who is now my father-in-law, and I told him I no longer wanted to be a priest. He said, "That's fine, if that's what you want to do. But I hope you don't. I think you have some gifts you could bring the church but beyond that, I think there are some gifts the church could bring you and if you walk away from your call there is the chance that you will create God in your own image, and worship yourself."

Needless to say, that always stuck with me. It stuck with me because it was true. It's like Voltaire says, "If God made us in his image, we have certainly returned the compliment." And I have to tell you, I don't actually want a God like me. I am not who I need in the middle of the night when my child's fever spikes and I begin to picture life without him. Yet, in the absence of a tangible God, we have done what the Israelites did in the desert and created a golden God to worship. We have, in our insecurity and fear, begun to image God as we want him to be... and that is dangerous ground for our souls. Because the truth is, God is even more powerful than we can imagine and our own ideas are too limited and they leave us all alone at night.

But today's Gospel lets us in on the truth behind Jesus Christ. Jesus exists in the darkness. He did not come to rescue us from our lives; he came to show us how to fully live into our lives. I wish, since God is good, that he would cure my brother of schizophrenia and give me assurance that my children will grow up and be OK. But that's not why the messiah came into the world. He is much more powerful than that. He will get to that, in the end, but there are steps between now and eternal life and that's the place where Jesus exists.

So today is the day we read about the transfiguration of Jesus—the day that Peter, James, and John go up the mountain with Jesus and witness him sparkling like a vampire in the Twilight series... or, that's how I picture it. Scripture says that He was transfigured before them. That his clothes were so white that not even Clorox bleach could compare. It's a weird moment in the gospel. Jesus, sparkling like diamonds, standing around talking to his dead friends: Moses and Elijah. We don't get to hear what they were talking about and Jesus doesn't use the moment to explain something about his nature or the kingdom of heaven. All we get is this supernatural scene happening in front of three disciples who are described as being "terrified." I would be too if my best friend was casually talking to ghosts and lighting up. Jesus' only response to his terrified followers is "don't tell anyone what you've seen." They were probably like, "deal, because people are going to think we're crazy."

In any case, the central theme of today's gospel is one of fear and confusion. For whatever reason, witnessing Jesus in his glory and being told who He actually is does not evoke wonder or overwhelming love. It doesn't evoke relief or comfort. It evokes bone chilling terror. Today's story means that God is going to speak directly to us and our first response is going to be, "No. No that's not what I

believed to be true.” One of my favorite priests, Richard Rohr, says “The first half of our life is spent creating the “container”—the structure of ego and False Self that keeps us safe, successful, and secure within our world. But at some point we realize that there is more to life, that we’re missing out on the ‘contents’.”

It seems that being willing to let go of the image we have worked so hard to create of ourselves and being willing to let go of our idea of “how things should” be will lead us into the truth of who God created us to be. This “emptying” will also make some room for us to truly grasp the greatness of God.

So when we feel unsafe and we let that lack of security tempt us to hold onto our own ideas about God, those ideas will fail us when we come up against darkness in our lives... because that God simply doesn’t exist. The one we really need is too hard to connect to because we are afraid to let go of what we’ve always known in order to see the divine. But today’s gospel coaches us through this introduction to the real Jesus by giving us some clues about how to handle coming face to face with the divine.

First, the two people on the mountain with Jesus are the two people in the Old Testament who also witnessed God on a mountain. That’s not a coincidence. They are there because they’ve seen God in his true form before and they know how to handle it. When Moses went up to Mount Sinai, scripture tells us that there was thunder and lighting. It says there was a thick cloud covering the sky—meaning it was dark. It says it was loud and the people “shook with fear.” This is how meeting God was described. It was in the dark, where fear reigned supreme.

The same was true for Elijah. Elijah meets God on Mount Horeb and scripture tells us there was a great wind that split mountains. After the wind came an earthquake, and after the earthquake came a fire and after the fire came a deafening silence.

Once again, to come face to face with the real God, we must go into the places that are the scariest, the most unsafe. Peter, James, and John meet Jesus on the mountain today and they witness Him in his true form, in all his glory. They discover that being the messiah is not about bringing the light but meeting us in the dark. They discover that they will never be alone in the middle of the night again.

On this Transfiguration Sunday we are invited to transfigure the way we imagine God. Yes, God is good. Yes, God weeps when we weep, and yes, God wants us to be safe. But there is so much more than that. Barbara Brown Taylor, in her most recent book, “Learning to Walk in the Dark” said, “I have learned things in the dark that I could never have learned in the light, things that have saved my life over and over again, so that there is really only one logical conclusion. I need darkness as much as I need light.”

I learned that day, talking to my bishop, that running from the things that make me uncomfortable does not banish those things from my life. Rather, staying in the dark and feeling hopeless and depressed and scared, is where Jesus will find me. It’s where I can rest in his arms and be told, “I’m here, we’ll do this together.” Essentially, I learned that God was not ever going to save me from going into the dark; it was there, in the dark, that I would be connected to Him.

Today’s gospel story is bizarre and other-worldly. It’s cloaked in mystery and we are tempted to throw it into the pile labeled, “well, God is just mysterious.” But today’s story is powerful. Today’s story invites us to participate with God in his

mysteries. Today's story informs us that God is not going to shield us from the dark; God is going to meet us there.