

FOCUS: The Good News is we, too, can be transfigured in the presence of God.

In the Name of the Father and of the +Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

There are stories in the Bible which don't just "take you out of yourself," they almost take you right out of this world: Just think of Moses before the burning bush, Jacob wrestling with the mysterious stranger at Peniel Moses, Aaron, and the elders of Israel before the feet of God at Sinai, Paul on the road to Damascus, the Bible is full of such stories.

But the story of the Transfiguration tops them all. If it is to be taken literally, we are here face to face with the totally supernatural. Perhaps as you heard this text from Mark's Gospel, you wondered, as I did, what that vision must have been like. It's getting on towards evening, and Jesus takes his inner circle of friends—Peter, James, and John—and starts to climb a mountain.

We can imagine the quizzical looks on their faces. Where is he taking us? Why are we climbing this hill? What's going on? But they follow, because that's what they do. They follow the Lord. Perhaps they can sense that something momentous is about to happen, but maybe they're only thinking about how tired they are, how much their feet hurt, and how soon will they be able to rest.

They reach a good height. The ground failing away beneath them in the gathering dusk. They are totally alone, isolated on the Mountainside. There are so many questions in their hearts. And then, as Jesus prays, they witness something they have never could have imagined:

Jesus begins to glow. Mark's gospel reports, "His face shone like the sun and his clothes became dazzling white, such as no one on earth could bleach them."¹ They look on dumbfounded, only to be still more astonished by what happens next. "Suddenly there appeared to them Moses and Elijah, talking with Jesus."² They are still on earth of course; but this is something unearthly, unimaginable, unexplainable.

No wonder the ever willing Peter is so confused that he blurts out the first thing that comes to mind, an offer to set up shelters for this awesome trio. But his idea comes to nothing. For even as he speaks, something far more momentous happens. A cloud comes over them and surrounds them and a voice—the voice of GOD—says:

THIS IS MY SON, THE BELOVED; LISTEN TO HIM!

¹ Mark 9:3 (NRSV)

² Mark 9:4 (NRSV)

This is more than the disciples can handle. Their minds cannot process these sights—cannot comprehend, cannot grasp. They fling themselves to the ground in stark terror. OH! To be back on the lake catching fish!

You can just feel the words, can't you? A voice from on high calls out—just to Peter, James, and John then, but to all of us now. Just a few short weeks ago, we heard similar words from a voice on high at the baptism of Jesus. Epiphany, a season of light in which we see Jesus Christ revealed, is book-ended with the voice of God telling us exactly who Jesus is. We have seen and heard much these past weeks. Those who witnessed the work of Jesus were constantly amazed and astonished. They were changed by what they saw. Yet, none of them truly understood at the time what it was—and who it was—they saw.

Today, we hear the familiar story of the Transfiguration. Jesus takes his three closest disciples—Peter, James, and John—with him to the mountain. Mountains are important places in the Bible. Big things happen on mountains. Moses was on Mount Sinai for forty days in the presence of the Lord. Isaiah foretold of days to come when the Lord's house would be placed high on the mountaintop. The devil tempted Jesus from a mountaintop. Jesus preached to the multitude from the mountainside. This time, the mountain serves as a meeting place.

Moses, Elijah, and Jesus. What a sight it must have been for Peter, James, and John. Moses led the Chosen People from captivity to the threshold of the Promised Land. Elijah was their prophet, taken up into heaven in the whirlwind, separated from Elisha by chariots of fire. We read in the fourth chapter of Malachi Elijah was to return before the coming of the Messiah. So here, on the mountain, the three disciples see Jesus with two of the greatest men in the history of the Hebrew people. It must have been astounding. I don't know about you, but I sure would be awe-struck to be standing in the presence of famous men and women of today. I can imagine Peter, standing on the hillside, mouth open. "Humma, humma, humma..." unable to put his brain and mouth in gear together, Peter blurts out, "Hey, we'll set up some tents for you!" Brilliant, Peter. An opportunity of a lifetime and you only think about a camping trip. Thankfully, we are spared listening to Peter babble on. The cloud appeared, and with it, yet again, The Voice. Terrified is probably an understatement! Moses and Elijah were gone as quickly as they appeared. There, standing alone before them, was Jesus. Radiant. "Dazzling white" attire. Peter, James, and John had no idea what it meant to be transfigured—what it meant to be in the presence of God. It had to be terrifying, standing in the presence of the Holy.

Would it be any different for us, should we find ourselves in the presence of God? Or, have we become the type of people about whom Walter Harreleson, a professor at Vanderbilt, was thinking of when he said: "We ought to be afraid when we walk into

the Sanctuary. We should be changed while we are here. We should walk out different than when we came in. Something should change in us, and that should scare us. We are no longer afraid in the presence of the Lord. We no longer fear meeting God face to face.”

I’m not so sure that we really aren’t afraid to be here, and that we really aren’t afraid to be changed. Otherwise, why do we go to such lengths to avoid truly being in the presence of God, if it is not to avoid the changes that are necessary to make us shine in the image of Christ? We constantly play hide and seek with God. I may be sitting in church, but if I am more concerned with how long the service is running, if I am thinking about what errands I need to do after I leave church, if I am planning what I need to do for tomorrow, then I am not truly present to the transforming power of the Spirit. If I am not truly in the presence of God, I am the one holding back. But I am free to open myself to the Spirit of God, to the very Love of Christ if I can only put aside my fear. We are all afraid at times. For some, even the idea of change is a terrifying prospect.

So, what are we to do? How can we be unlike Peter and unlike our “normal” selves and be ready and open to accept the transforming power of the Spirit? Well, it’s not as difficult as we might think. The first step is to look up. Put on an attitude of gratitude—greet God. In Psalm 121 the Psalmist says, “I will lift up my eyes to the hills from whence comes my help”³ God says in Isaiah, “Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you; when you walk through the fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you.”⁴

After assuming an attitude of gratitude—open yourself to God in prayer. Kneel, sit, stand, walk—it doesn’t matter, really, how you come to prayer. And, the good thing about prayer is that you don’t have to be any special place in order to pray. Pray in the shower, if you want. Pray at your desk, or in your car, or as you walk toward the entrance to the mall. Pray willingly and freely. If you can’t, then pray that you can be able to pray willingly and freely. Pray when you can—even if it is in short bursts. It is amazing how prayer can transform us. Prayer, like almost everything else we do, becomes a habit when we do it regularly. Prayer should comfort us—keep us from being terrified. But, what if we are still nervous, terrified, or uncomfortable? What then?

Then, my sisters and brothers, turn to the Word. Open your Bibles and read. Let the Word of God come into your life through the pages of Scripture. Start with your fa-

³ Psalm 121:1 (NRSV)

⁴ Isaiah 43:2 (NRSV)

favorite passages. Or, open to the Psalms and pray the prayers and hymns of the Hebrew people. Or, read the wisdom found in Proverbs. Or, follow the path of the apostles through the eyes and words of Luke in Acts. Read, reflect, pray. As you read more, reflect more, and pray more, you will become more comfortable. You will experience change. You will find yourself in the presence of the Holy. God is constantly present with us. God's hand is not closed and threatening, but open and welcoming.

A nineteen-year-old Canadian pilot wrote these words. I'm sure they are familiar to many of you:

“Oh, I have slipped the surly bonds of earth, And danced the skies on laughter-silvered wings. Sunward I climbed, and joined the tumbling mirth Of sun-split clouds -- and done a hundred things You have not dreamed of-- wheeled and soared and swung High on the sunlit silence. Hov'ring there, I've chased the shouting wind along, and flung My eager craft through footless halls of air. “Up, up the long delirious, burning blue, I've topped the windswept heights with easy grace Where never lark, or even eagle flew -- And, while with silent, lifting mind I've trod The high untresspassed sanctity of space, Put out my hand and touched the face of God.”⁵

These words of John Gillespie Magee, an American born in Shanghai, China, who met his death serving with the Royal Canadian Air Force in World War II, help us to understand what it means to be transfigured. To reach out to God, to take Jesus' hand, and to let the light of God's love shine through us. This is what the Transfiguration can be for us: a glimpse of the glory of God in Jesus—a glimpse of knowledge illuminating our ignorance and fear—and of the light shining in the darkness. No matter what our moods or situations might be, both on the mountaintops and in the valleys of our lives; Jesus is the Lord who stood in glory, and who will stand in glory with us before the throne of God.

⁵ Written September 3, 1941, and sent to his parents.