

Feast of the Transfiguration Year A: 5 / 6 August 2017

St. James Episcopal Church, Clinton NY

Fr. Gary Cyr

The Transfiguration simply asks: Where have you experienced God in your life?

Exodus 34:29-35
2 Peter 1:13-21
Luke 9:28-36
Psalm 99 or 99:5-9

One of the things you learn when your dad is a barber is that tradesmen who work for themselves don't get paid leave or vacation time. That translates into family holidays not lasting longer than a weekend. As such, there isn't much traveling that can be done in two short days—though some may argue differently. So taking time away with the family meant staying within in a certain radius of home. Fortunately, my family was religious, so we often went off on what some call pilgrimages.

Now when I say pilgrimages, I'm not speaking of going to the baseball Hall of Fame, or some such thing. I'm actually talking about a pilgrimage to a religious shire. The closest was St. Ann-de-Beaupre, just 19 miles outside of Quebec City; further down the Trans-Canada Highway in Three Rivers was Norte Dame-de-Cap, and another 60-minute drive you have St. Joseph's Oratory in Montreal. Each shrine has its own flare, its own allure. The one we most frequented by my family was St. Ann-de-Beaupre, not just because it was the closest, but because it held special meaning for my mom.

One of the things I most remember about visiting St. Ann-de-Beaupre was the Scala Santa, a chapel of sorts which was built on the side of a steep hill. It's named after the supposed staircase Jesus walked to Pilot's praetorium or place of residence to use today's vernacular. To reach the interior chapel one entered the lower part of the building and faced a well-worn flight of stairs. These twenty or more steps were well worn, not by foot traffic, but from pilgrims climbing the steps on their knees, stopping on each step to recite a prayer before continuing to the next step on their way to completing the whole flight. To pray this way was to walk in the footsteps of Christ and his passion. I do recall doing it once, and I know my parents did it as well. For many, this religious practice is not only one of devotion, but one of seeking an experience of God. However, if someone wanted a more intense form of this kind of devotion, they had only to go to St. Joseph's Oratory and do the same act on the outside steps—all three very, very long flights.

The Feast of the Transfiguration is somewhat akin to those who seek a religious experience, one that helps them feel the presence of God or to encounter Christ. Luke, the consummate storyteller that he is, expands on Mark's and Matthew's version of the event. He embellishes it some, adding a bit more color

to the story thus giving it a more nuanced reading. For instance, instead of Jesus being referred to as Rabbi (as in Mark's gospel) or Lord (as in Matthew's), Luke uses Master as the disciple's form of address. Jesus is the master, the one whose "orders" you follow.

Like any good encounter with God, one must go up to the top of a mountain; one must ascend to the heaven, so to speak. After all, Moses went up a mountain to speak to God and in return received the Law or Commandments. So, there they are: Jesus, Peter, James, and John on top of a mountain. And something happens. Something that changes how the disciples view and understand Jesus, this simple man, born into poverty, a laborer by trade, yet knowledgeable in Torah and the Law. He is revealed to be more than they imagined. He is identified with Moses, the giver of the Law and Elijah, the prophet of God. Jesus is here portrayed through narrative license as the fulfillment of the Law and the Prophets. It is a narrative moment that also foreshadows Jesus's own exodus through his crucifixion, resurrection and ascension when he is taken up to heaven just like Elijah. To be seen with Moses and Elijah is to be in line with what the Law and all the Prophets spoke of: that God will reconcile all things through God's Messiah, the Anointed One. Jesus is the face of God in Creation. To experience Jesus is to experience God such that one is forever transformed, transfigured if you will. Whatever word you want to use, one is changed by the encounter.

Moses was changed such that he eventually wore a veil to hide the "glow" that emanated from him, a veil that he removed whenever he was in the presence of God, which is significant in its own right as it demonstrates one's vulnerability, one's nakedness before God. The disciples who were with Jesus also were changed by Jesus's transfiguration, albeit not in ways that glowed. Rather, their first reaction is to commemorate the experience by erecting booths. Maybe they wanted to sell religious bobbles or trinkets as souvenirs. More likely, it symbolically points to the Festival of Booths, or Sukkot—the late fall festival where the Israelites commemorate their wondering in the desert as well as give thanks for the final harvest. Erecting booths speaks to celebrating one's journey in awaiting the Messiah and the Messiah being revealed. Yet, we are told, no booths are erected that day, nor do any of those present speak of the experience.

It's not too unusual, after all. If you encountered Jesus as God's presence in Creation, would you go around talking about it? Probably not. And why might that be?

The answer to that question, I believe, is self-evident. True as that may be, I do believe many of us have had encounters with God in our lives – transforming encounters that alter our perception of life, thus changing the way we understand and live our lives. I know I have in my own life.

I don't often talk about those experiences since they are very personal. These experiences transformed me in ways that is hard to explain. Even the experience itself is difficult to give voice to since

words often fail to capture the heart of the encounter. Nevertheless, they happen. And I wager that some of you have had experiences with God that transformed your own life, and to which you may not be comfortable publicly sharing. You may have felt what the disciples possibly felt that day on the mountain and wondered who would believe you if you did talk about it. What do you mean you heard a voice coming from the clouds saying Jesus is God's chosen one? What do you mean you saw God face to face? What do you mean you experienced God in that person or through that encounter with another? Do you need therapy?

The Feast of the Transfiguration is less about Booths and even less about Jesus being aglow. Bringing this story forward to today, it's about our encounter with Jesus and the transformation that can occur through that experience. If that is so, then the flip side becomes important: If I have encountered God in my life, do I now live in such a way that others may experience and encounter God through my words and actions? That, for me, is what it means to be the Body of Christ.

We, you and I, are the Body of Christ present in the world. We gather here to worship God for a variety of reasons, where through Word and Sacrament, we give thanks to God for the blessings of this life. For some, they will encounter God here in receiving the Eucharist. For others, it may occur in life, in listening to a friend's lament, in comforting those who grieve, in holding the hands of a dying person, or in celebrating another's joy. The variety of ways is endless. It could be in an act of devotion climbing stairs on one's knees, as well as in feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, sheltering the homeless.

Most of us will not have a mountain top experience of Jesus such as the disciples had, which is not to say we do not have life transforming experiences of God. I believe we do. Luke simply reminds us in this story that we do encounter the living Christ, and in fact, as the disciples were changed by Jesus's transfiguration, we too are changed, especially through Word and Sacrament whereby we become the Body of Christ in the world. The Transfiguration simply asks: Where have you experienced God in your life? From which follows a second question: How have you witnessed Christ to the world such that others may have an experience of God?