

Living by Vision

Luke 9:28-36

February 22, 2009

Transfiguration is living by vision... In those moments when people glimpse the light of the transcendent in their midst, there the New Creation has come upon us. The world for one brief moment is transfigured. The beyond shines in our midst – on the way to the cross.

- Walter Wink (adapted)

The Reading

Now about eight days after these sayings Jesus took with him Peter and John and James, and went up on the mountain to pray. ²⁹And while he was praying, the appearance of his face changed, and his clothes became dazzling white. ³⁰Suddenly they saw two men, Moses and Elijah, talking to him. ³¹They appeared in glory and were speaking of his departure, which he was about to accomplish at Jerusalem. ³²Now Peter and his companions were weighed down with sleep; but since they had stayed awake, they saw his glory and the two men who stood with him. ³³Just as they were leaving him, Peter said to Jesus, 'Master, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah'—not knowing what he said. ³⁴While he was saying this, a cloud came and overshadowed them; and they were terrified as they entered the cloud. ³⁵Then from the cloud came a voice that said, 'This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!' ³⁶When the voice had spoken, Jesus was found alone. And they kept silent and in those days told no one any of the things they had seen.

Then and Now

If you pay any attention to the liturgical calendar and the recommended readings for the Christian year, it should dawn on you just how many references to Moses pop up in the scriptures for this period. We are approaching Lent, of course, which is traditionally compared to the forty years of wilderness wanderings of Moses and the ancient Hebrews after they had been liberated from Egypt in the Exodus event. The forty days of Lent allude to those forty years of wandering, of spiritual journey. As a matter of fact in the passage that I read to you a few moments ago, the reference to Jesus' *departure* at Jerusalem is an unfortunate translation of the Greek word used elsewhere to translate exodus. Jesus, it seems, shares this event with

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Moses and the Hebrews. Then, of course, in the experience on the mountain top, Jesus' face and garments shine as did Moses when he was in the presence of God. And Jesus converses with Moses and Elijah in a revelation so wonderful and awe inspiring that one would expect the disciples to sing its praises while coming down from the mountain; yet Luke surprises us with the news that they were silent, telling no one about the experience.

There's a good reason for the disciples to refrain from broadcasting this encounter between Moses and Jesus, because as much as the experience of the transfigured Jesus seems to be a conclusion, a high point, an ending; it really signals a beginning; a gradual awakening to the true nature and purpose of this Jesus and his mission. And let me tell you, this beginning came in the nick of time, because the disciples had just heard a first, some cock and bull story of a Messiah who would suffer and even die! They needed time to process this understanding; and they needed a new perspective on the Jesus they would accompany to Jerusalem for his exodus. The first installment of this new perspective came with the transfiguration. We, too, need time to process our understanding of Jesus as God's unique Messiah; we, too, need a new perspective on Jesus as we begin our Lenten journey. Thus, I invite you to examine the transfiguration with me as we prepare our hearts for the forty days of Lent. Would you pray with me?

Gracious One, we pray for the courage to scale the mountain in search of a transfigured Christ: Christ in glory; Christ in the company of Moses and Elijah; Christ accompanied by the pronouncement of God, This is my Son, my chosen. We pray as well that this experience will be for us a beginning; the first steps on a journey of faith that will grow in depth and strength through the forty days of Lent; the beginning of a spiritual journey made in your presence. In the name of the Christ we pray. Amen.

Holiness Shining Through

If you were writing a gospel, how would you describe this scene on the mountain in which three bleary-eyed and sleep-deprived disciples catch a glimpse of a transfigured Jesus standing with Moses and Elijah? Would you call it a miracle? A dream? A hallucination? Matthew calls it a *dream-like image* shared by Peter, James, and John. Luke doesn't presume to label the experience; but reports in understated simplicity an experience so extraordinary, so overwhelming, that the disciples were unable to find words to describe it.

Most of us are probably more comfortable with Matthew's approach; searching for a category in which to file this experience, an explanation that penetrates its mystique and unravels its mystery. Just a few years ago I would have been there myself; I would not have rested until I found an acceptable explanation for this experience; a way to reconcile it with the history of Jesus, the story of a flesh and blood Galilean peasant that lies behind the gospels. Today, however, I identify more with Luke. I am convinced that there is wisdom in Luke's approach to the experience; I am convinced that if we want to unleash the power of this story, we must at some point allow it to speak in its own voice, without trying to analyze, classify, and ultimately tame its truth.

If we can curb our very natural desire to classify and control, we may be able to agree that in whatever fashion it transpired, Peter, James, and John experienced God on that remote mountain top. All of the metaphors Luke chose to dramatize this experience shout of revelation. It took place on a mountain top, long identified in Hebrew thought with the revelation of God. And of course the extraordinary appearance of Jesus recalls the experience of Moses, whose skin glowed from being in God's presence. Finally, the presence of cloud, voice, and glory all indicate revelation.

Frederick Buechner captures something of the disciples' experience in noting that it *was* Jesus of Nazareth the disciples saw that night, the man with whom they had tramped many a dusty mile, whom they had seen as hungry, tired, and footsore as the rest of them. But they also saw Messiah, the Christ in glory. "It was the holiness of the man shining through his humanness, his face so afire with it they were almost blinded."ⁱ

At the Foot of the Mountain

This story is about mystery, wonder, and awe-inspiring experience; and if we want to unleash its power for us this morning, we must allow it to speak in its own voice, allow it to flow over and through us, and wash us away in its current. If we will do so, we may find ourselves standing at the foot of the Mount of Transfiguration silenced by awe, almost blinded by the brilliance of God's presence among us, and inspired to live by vision. Perhaps Walter Wink is

right; perhaps transfiguration is living by vision; recognizing God's presence in and all around us, and allowing God to transform our lives from within.

For the disciples this experience came none too soon. Just before climbing the mountain with Jesus, they had been informed for the first time that God's Messiah would suffer and die before coming into glory. What a shock it must have been to realize for the first time that God's presence didn't offer an escape from life and its many ills, but rather a way through them. As shocking as this must have been, however, their experience on the mountain top convinced them that God's presence would accompany them into a largely unknown and often confusing future; that God's awe-inspiring and wonder-full presence would illumine and strengthen them from within, and afford them the vision and courage to pass through darkness and even death to life; to meaning, wholeness, and peace.

The Courage to Begin

At some point we all learn that God's presence doesn't offer an escape from life. Like it or not, we all learn that we must pass through darkness to light, that we must suffer the world's ills in order to pass beyond them to wholeness. Unfortunately, fewer of us are able to absorb this shock and still climb the mountain in search of God's presence. What's the use, many ask, what's the value of faith and the spiritual path if it doesn't guide us around, not through, darkness? Paul responded to this question in his correspondence to the fledgling Christian church in Corinth. Climb the mountain, he advised, stand in awe of God's glory, because God will illumine you from within, offer you strength and courage, and transform you slowly but surely into the very glory on which you gaze.

Paul struggled with the realization that God was in Christ not to lead him around but through the brokenness of life; that Jesus by word and deed showed us that the way to light is through the darkness. The way to transformation is not by avoiding the brokenness of life, but by passing through it with God – here's the key – passing through it with God, knowing in faith that holiness really does shine through humanness. We can walk through life with the clear understanding that God is with us. We can look straight ahead on our path knowing that God in Christ is with us.

You and I may not experience the sight of Jesus transformed on a high and lonely mountain, but God's holiness still shines through humanness. It may be reflected in the eyes of one of the clients at IHN, someone who comes through the service line at the Argentine Food Kitchen; it may be in the eyes of someone to whom you serve communion at Garden Terrace; it may be in the sound of a voice offering a prayer to God. It can happen in a flash – any time or any place - but God's holiness does shine through humanness.

And it's just in time, this assurance, because we have been invited to set our face toward Jerusalem. We have been invited to summon the courage to begin our Lenten journey: to meditate on our lives openly and honestly, their openness to God, our own humanness, and our need for God. We can do so knowing that the holy does shine through the human, and that God will walk with us every step of the way. It's my prayer that in the days ahead, we will all know the courage that comes from the assurance of God's loving presence, and that we will truly see the holy shining through the human. Amen.

¹ Frederick Buechner, *Transfiguration*.