

Matthew 17:1-9

Jesus took with him Peter and James and his brother John and led them up a high mountain, by themselves. And he was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became dazzling white. Suddenly there appeared to them Moses and Elijah, talking with him. Then Peter said to Jesus, 'Lord, it is good for us to be here; if you wish, I will make three dwellings here, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.' While he was still speaking, suddenly a bright cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud a voice said, 'This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!' When the disciples heard this, they fell to the ground and were overcome by fear. But Jesus came and touched them, saying, 'Get up and do not be afraid.' And when they looked up, they saw no one except Jesus himself alone.

As they were coming down the mountain, Jesus ordered them, 'Tell no one about the vision until after the Son of Man has been raised from the dead.'

Some have suggested that the problem of our times is ecstasy deficit. We have become so busy about our own affairs that we have lost an appreciation of beauty. We overlook the wonder of our being and an enchantment with creation. The world is all too often viewed in terms of consumption and the acquiring of possessions. As a result, we can have trouble marveling at a baby's birth, a child's laugh, a bird in flight, or a couple walking hand in hand and a photo of a far off galaxy, or just a few days ago, the news of a nearby star with 8 earth-like planets revolving around it. We've become objects to ourselves and struggle feeling ecstasy and appreciating beauty.

On July 4, 1952, a young woman named Florence Chadwick waded into the water off Catalina Island. She was setting out to swim the channel from the island to the California coast. This was no novice undertaking. Florence Chadwick had already been the first woman to swim the English Channel in both directions.

The day, however, was very foggy. The fog was so thick she could hardly see the boats moving slowly alongside her. Chadwick knew that she was attracting sharks. Several times during the swim, people in boats alongside her were firing at the sharks with rifles to drive them off. Nevertheless she swam for more than 15 hours before she asked to be taken out of the water. Her trainer tried to encourage her to swim on because they were so close to the land. But when Florence looked, all she saw was fog. So she quit. When they pulled her from the water, she was only one-mile from her goal, a goal she did not reach.

The fog blinded her like the concerns and anxieties of our lives can blind us.

Theologian Alfred North Whitehead stated that the aim of the universe, the aim of God, is toward the production of beauty. Beauty, for Whitehead, is not just a nice feeling; beauty is a deeply religious emotion. For him, good morality involved bringing forth beauty wherever we find it. And immorality involved defacing beauty or failing to appreciate it.

The Celtic Christians in Ireland spoke of “thin places” where “heaven and earth meet” and God’s grandeur bursts forth through creation. Today’s scriptures describe such “thin places” - a fire on the mountain as Moses receives divine guidance, and the illumination of Jesus on the mountain of transfiguration. The earth is full of places where heaven and earth meet but do we see them?

Scripture scholars have pointed out parallels between Jesus’ Transfiguration and his Crucifixion. They have called the crucifixion a “dark twin” to the story of the Transfiguration.

In both stories Jesus is elevated on a mountain. In one case Jesus is transfigured in bright light, in the other a supernatural darkness descends upon the land. In the one Jesus’ garments are illuminated, in the other they are stripped off. In the one Elijah appears, in the other he doesn’t, although he is mentioned. In the one two saints appear with Jesus (Moses and Elijah), in the other Jesus is crucified between two criminals. In the one Jesus is glorified, in the other he is humiliated. In the one a divine voice confesses Jesus to be God’s Son, and in the other the confession is expressed by a Roman soldier. In the one Jesus is honored, in the other Jesus is mocked.

Together the two scenes illustrate the extremes of the human experience. The crucifixion is spit and mockery, nails and nakedness, blood and loneliness, torture and death. On the other hand, the transfiguration makes visible the presence of God and the divination of human nature. So Jesus embodies the scope of human possibilities. Jesus is the paradigm of both despair and hope; he is humanity desecrated and humanity glorified.

Perhaps the starkest contrast we can draw is between the voice of God at the Transfiguration and the voice of Jesus on the cross. On the mount of glory, the Divine Voice affirms Jesus, “This is my Son, my Beloved, in whom I am well pleased.” At the cross, God is silent. Jesus in anguish cries out, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me.”

Like Jesus, God’s Spirit us with us through all of life, in times of joy and hope, and in times of pain and disappointment.

The whole world is God's temple. God's glory can show up anywhere because it is present everywhere, even though in often it remains hidden. In the letter to the Colossians (2:3), Paul writes: "In Christ are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge" and later he tells his readers, "you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God" (3:3).

God works behind the scenes, seemingly out of the way, hidden, but present with us in the midst of all of it. In all the messiness and hurt and heartbreak God is there and we can tap into these hidden treasures of wisdom and knowledge.

Being a follower of Jesus - a disciple of Christ, is about the journey, not the destination, and the journey leads us to the cross. Peter, on the mount of transfiguration thought they had arrived. He wanted to build three dwellings so they could all hang out on the mountain of glory. But in mid-sentence, the Divine Voice cut him off and said, "This is my son, listen to him." That voice was also meant for us today.

In the midst of the fog of life and there is confusion, we can always embrace and follow the gifts of the holy spirit: "Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control." (Galatians 5:22-23).

Just prior to the Transfiguration, Jesus told the disciples he was going to be rejected by the Jewish leaders, that he would undergo great suffering and be killed, then be raised up. After he tells his disciples this he says, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it" (Matt 16:24-25).

The path of discipleship that leads to real conversion, real change and growth is a path that leads through death into rebirth. That's the authentic pattern for transformation.

Elisabeth Kübler-Ross stated: "The most beautiful people we have known are those who have known defeat, known suffering, known struggle, known loss, and have found their way out of the depths. These persons have an appreciation, sensitivity, and an understanding of life that fills them with compassion, gentleness, and a deep loving concern. Beautiful people do not just happen."

Amen.