

“And shall we be transfigured as well?”

First of all, I have to say how good it is to be back. It’s been nearly a month since my surgery, and my recovery has been progressing very nicely. And it was a combination of the fact that I was beginning to feel a lot better, and the fact that I was getting really bored with being homebound, that last week I decided to put in a couple of hours each day in the office. And for the most part that worked out pretty well. However, my stamina isn’t yet what it was, and that’s why even though I’m preaching today, I’m doing very little else.

I also have to say a big “Thank you!” to Fr. Jeff, who took on my share of the pastoral load, and to Debi Hodson, to took on my share of the administrative load, while I was away. Knowing that those two, and many others, were here enabled me to relax and get on with the task of healing. I appreciate them both very much; they’re priceless partners in this ministry.

And finally a huge “Thank you!” to all of you. For the food. For the cards and letters. For your prayers and best wishes. For your support. And for your friendship. Peggy and I felt well taken care of. But most of all we felt loved. That’s a good place to be. Thank you.

So, here we are at the very end of the Epiphany season. But to be honest, my mind is not on today. I’m thinking more about the fact that the season of Lent begins on Wednesday with our Ash Wednesday services. That our Shrove Tuesday pancake supper is only two days away. And that our midweek Lenten programs will begin in ten days, on the 25th. So, even though we’re still in the season of Epiphany, my mind really, and understandably, is elsewhere.

However, therein lies a real pitfall. Because if you’re as distracted as I am—and perhaps you are, but likely not by things like pancake suppers and such—there is a real risk that we’ll miss something really important that’s going on in our gospel reading.

The transfiguration of Jesus is a familiar story. It occurs in three of the four gospels— which tells us that it was an important story for the early church—

and it comes up twice each year— which tells us that it remains an important for the church.

The challenge for this story is contained in the old adage “Familiarity breeds contempt.” This is such a familiar story that it has virtually lost its ability to have any effect over us. And to be honest, during the course of a typical year, when I realize that the transfiguration is the gospel for the next Sunday, I think to myself, “What’s the point? Haven’t we milked it for all it’s worth? What can possibly be gained from visiting it again?” But then I’m reminded that even though *the story* hasn’t changed one bit since the last time we looked at it, *we have*. We’re each at a different place on our spiritual journey since we last heard this story. Our experiences have changed us. Our perceptions have changed. Our needs have changed. And the story of the transfiguration of Jesus is one that can continue to feed us over and over again.

Several years ago, I was driving home after work. Heading south on I-35, I was driving through one of the worst storms in memory. Water was coming down in sheets. Thunder and lightning were all around. It was one of those rainstorms where you have to drive slowly, with the windshield wipers on high, with your breath fogging up the windows. And even though it was still in the afternoon, the world outside was dark. But suddenly, however, it was as if I had passed through a doorway: the rain stopped, the clouds broke, and I saw this brilliant shaft of light cutting through the clouds, and bathing the ground in a warm glow. And for a few moments, it seemed as if everything was somehow clearer. Everything had more definition. It was a beautiful sight, and it reminded me of a scene in one of those movie where explorers are trudging wearily along a high mountain path, when they turn a corner and suddenly find themselves gazing upon Shangri-La. I don’t think I realized it at the moment, but I was witnessing a transfiguration!

As I’ve thought back upon that experience, I’ve come to the conclusion that what happens in a transfiguration is different from what I’ve always thought. It isn’t that a transfiguration changes something from one thing into another. Rather, in the moment that a transfiguration takes place, it’s as if blinders have been removed from our eyes and we’re seeing something as it really is.

When I was in highschool science, I remember how astounded I was to learn that leaves don’t change color in the fall. Not really. Rather, when temperatures start to get colder, the leaves simply stop producing chlorophyll, which is a green pigment that allows leaves to absorb energy from light. Without the chlorophyll being present— without that green pigment coursing through

their veins— the leaves can finally display their true colors. I think this is a type of transfiguration, because we're finally getting to see something that was there all along, but which had been hidden from us.

Now, having said this, when we turn our attention back to the reading from Mark's gospel, the obvious question is: What was being hidden, which the transfiguration of Jesus revealed? That's a good question!

Several years ago, at an international conference on religion, an American delegate was talking to a Shinto priest. And he said to the priest: "I've been to lots of your ceremonies, and I've seen many of your shrines. But I honestly don't understand your theology." After thinking about this for a few moments, the Shinto priest shook his head and said, "I don't think we have theology. We dance."

In today's gospel reading, we're told that Jesus took Peter, James, and John up a high mountain with him. Although our text doesn't say, I think we can safely assume that they were going away to a quiet spot to pray. All of a sudden, everything the disciples assumed they knew about Jesus was stripped away. And what was revealed to them transcended all their theology, their dogma, and their doctrines. Because what was revealed in that moment was (if you will) a dance. In fact, it was *the* dance between God and his son. And it was a dance witnessed by Elijah, Moses, and three very astonished disciples. And when the dance had ended, rather than offering to build three booths, the disciples should just have clapped.

Now, all this sounds good, but there's a problem. Did any of you notice that when Fr. Jeff finished his excellent reading to today's gospel reading that nobody clapped? There's a reason for that. According to Robert Farrar Capon— author, theologian, and Episcopal priest— Christians today suffer from a crippling disability: We have forgotten how to be astonished. We have so many different agendas and concerns, that absolutely sap our time and energy, that we have forgotten what it feels like to be in awe. Rather than taking the time needed to recapture the astonishment of the gospel, we have focused on our agendas, we have been distracted by those concerns (and some of them are very real), and instead have opted to board one of the many ideological buses that run around inside every church. And we think, "I'll just take care of this. I'll just attend to that. And then I'll have time to slow down and pay attention." And though our intentions are good, there are always new buses pulling up to the curb, distracting us, inviting us, demanding something else from us. And even though we may write all that off as life in the 21st century, what we risk missing is the one

thing that has been at the core of the Christian experience: that is, being astonished by the Gospel. Capon writes:

“We have forfeited that fascination with strangeness which alone can enable us to do justice to the strange God of the strange Scriptures whom we, as the strangest of all possible religious institutions, must [present] to the world. And what we need, is to recover ‘the coin of astonishment.’”

As the people of God, we are supposed to be the “outward and visible sign” of God’s presence in the world. And at the heart of all this, is our experience of God through Christ. Now, make no mistake, it’s this experience that the human soul thirsts for. People want a relationship with that Mystery which is the source of all existence. They want, in other words, a relationship that takes us—individually and corporately—beyond all of the ideologies, theologies, doctrines, and dogmas. This is the transfiguration the human heart seeks. But how do we find it?

Meister Eckhart, the 13th-century mystic once wrote:

“We need to leave the god that we have created in our own image and likeness, and seek out the God who lives beyond concepts and notions. Seek the God who is more than our constructs and consciences and categories and conduct. Seek the God who is Wholly Other, and yet Unfailingly Present. Seek the God who was made flesh in Jesus— and who is made flesh in us through the Holy Spirit.”

But how do we get there? How can we renew our astonishment at the Gospel? Will it happen through worship? Or service? Or fellowship? Yes, all these, and more.

An 18th-century rabbi once said to his followers that

“Prayer is the gate through which we enter to God. Learn to pray and you’ll come to know, and be attached to, the Holy One. Talk to God as you would talk to your very best friend. Tell the Holy One everything.”

Well, that's as good a place, as any, to start. In other words, pray in the most open, true, and easy way you can think of. Forget the formal language, and simply speak from your heart. And if nothing happens, if no voice rumbles from the heavens, or if no cloud appears, don't worry about it. Because just *wanting* to speak with God is, in itself, a very great thing. The very *desire* for prayer is a catalyst for change.

To paraphrase what Jesus once said: If we ask for it, we'll receive it. If we seek it, we'll find it. And when we knock on it's door, the door will be opened for us. That is the promise. And sometimes, when we act on that promise, transfigurations occur.

A child was once asked "What's a saint?" A saint, he answered, is a person the light shines through. He was probably thinking of the saints depicted in stained glass windows. And although it was a pretty good answer, he had the light coming from the wrong direction. For saints are those people *out of whom* God's light shines into the world. And I think it is in this sense that we are called to let our lives be so transfigured, that God's light will shine from us.

Amen.