

Transfiguration A 2017

August 6, 2017 :: Exodus 34:29-35; 2 Peter 1:13-21; Luke 9:28-36

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## “The Transfiguration of Jesus, and Us.”

Several years ago, a survey was conducted of several thousand Americans, asking them if they had ever had “a religious experience,” which was defined as a personal experience, of whatever sort, that made them feel as if they were somehow in the nearer presence of God. The survey also asked whether they attended church, and, if so, what denomination they preferred.

Interestingly, of those answering “Yes,” Episcopalians ranked at the very top of mainline denominations. Somewhere between 70 and 80% of Episcopalians surveyed, said that they had — at least one time in their life — had some sort of religious experience. That’s a lot. That’s something to talk about.

And yet — and this also is backed up with statistics — for the most part, we Episcopalians act like those disciples that we heard about at the end of our gospel reading, where:

“they kept silent, and in those days told no one any of the things they had seen.”

For the most part we're like them. For whatever reason, our lips are sealed. And that's really unfortunate, because there are *a lot of people* who've had something really important happen to them. But they've either never *had* the opportunity, or they've never *taken* the opportunity, to talk about it with others. And it's that talking about it, that helps people to come to terms with the experience, and talking about it helps people to situate that experience within the context of their lives, and figure out how to take advantage of it.

So today, I want to say just a few things about our religious experiences. And as it turns out, this is a good day for that kind of discussion. Because, every seven years or so, August 6, the Feast of the Transfiguration of Jesus, falls on a Sunday. And that's today. And when it comes to religious experiences, the one we just heard about in our gospel reading was a real beauty. And so, I want to look at some of that story in the light of how it can help us understand our own experiences of the presence of God.

The first thing to notice is that not all of the disciples went up on the mountain with Jesus. In fact, Jesus asked only three of the twelve to be with him. The rest stayed behind and waited.

And it's always been true that not everyone has the kind of experience that those three disciples had. But, then again, no one has to; there is no necessity to have such an experience. As one preacher described it:

“Such things are gifts that are given at the unfathomable whimsey of God, and it is both useless and misguided to be proud of what we [may have experienced], or to envy what others have [experienced and] we [have] not. It is simply a gift.”

But at the same time, it is real. Peter, James, and John were not suffering from overactive imaginations, or indigestion, or anything else you might think. The glimpse of glory they were given, was truly of God, and it spoke truly about who God is.

To be sure, not everyone who goes around saying that they've had a vision, have really had a vision; not by a long shot. But for those who have, such moments *are* extraordinarily real, and they are wonderful, and there is nothing else quite like it.

And what the disciples saw at the Transfiguration, was Jesus glorified — Jesus as he *would* be, when all things were complete, when all the roads had been walked, and when all his struggles were finally over. In other words, what they saw, was not the way things really were *then*, and what they saw was not even the way things were supposed to be, then. What they saw was a glimpse ahead, a peek at the goal, a peek at the fulfillment of all things.

And that's where Peter gets messed up, and that's where it's so easy for us to get messed up. Peter wanted to make this moment of glory, this great vision of Jesus, this religious experience, permanent. Or, at the very least, repeatable. He wanted to build a shrine; he wanted to nail everything down. He wanted to freeze that moment, and make it so that the duration of his life, was like that moment, but all of the time. And Luke tells us that Peter didn't know what he was talking about.

After all, the whole point of an extraordinary moment, is that it *isn't* ordinary. And as wonderful as it can be, it cannot be that way all of the time. To demand that, or to want that, or to crave that, is futile. But it's also one of the great dangers of such a gift. Peter's misguided desire to build booths, is repeated every time

someone insists of God, that life remains for all time, in the way that it was in that moment of the experience, when everything seemed perfect. But the fact of the matter is, such experiences are *supposed* to go away. And life is *supposed* to return to “normal,” and things are *supposed* to go pretty much the way they always have been. That’s just how it works.

You see, there are really only two reasons for someone to receive such a gift — a little reason, and a big reason. The little reason is that a moment of glory like that, is given to be *enjoyed*, to be *rejoiced* in, to be *relished*. And there’s really is nothing else like it. It’s meant to be a moment of respite, a moment of refreshment, and a moment of renewal. And that’s how it is.

But Peter himself finally figured out the other reason, the big reason, for such experiences. Our reading from 2<sup>nd</sup> Peter was written many years after the Transfiguration. And Peter is speaking about that event, and says that the moment on the holy mountain was to be

“like a light shining in a dark place, until the day dawns.”

In other words, these moments are *not* given to take the place of the rest of life. They are *not* given so that we may build booths and put the experience, as it were, in a box. Rather, they are given to remind us, in the midst of our real lives, that there is more out there than we realize, that there is a goal, that there is hope, and that what you see is *not* all that you get.

Immediately after the Transfiguration, Jesus led Peter, James, and John down the mountain, and their long journey to Jerusalem began. Their experience on the mountain top did not take the place of that journey. Their experience did not keep returning every time things got a little bit dicey. And it especially did not take the place of the cross.

And yet, those who were there atop that mountain, those who witnessed that moment, were changed forever. If need be, they could remember what had happened, and in remembering they would know that there was more ahead than they could ever imagine; and they could find in that knowledge, both hope and direction.

And so it is with us. Those gifts of glory, those moments when we experience the presence of God, those special times, whatever they may be, are given to us as a light on the road. They are given to help us when things get dark, or perhaps worse, when things get ordinary and dull, and we seem right back where we started.

But God is real, and from time to time we may be asked to go up to the mountain top with Jesus. But, whether we are one of those who are taken to the mountain top, or whether we are one of those who stay behind and wait, we are all called to travel the same road. And the Feast of the Transfiguration reminds us that we are not alone, and that we are part of something much larger than ourselves.

Amen.