

A Sermon for the Last Sunday after the Epiphany, Year B
February 26, 2006 – Mark 9: 2-9
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And we shall be transfigured as well!

Even though today is the *last* Sunday in the season of Epiphany – and the season of Lent begins in three days, with our Ash Wednesday worship services – we’re still technically in Epiphany, and things are still being revealed to us, even at this late hour.

The gospel we’ve just heard describes the transfiguration of Jesus. That’s what we’ve been told, but what exactly is being revealed? For me, the key to understanding the transfiguration is the light that’s described in that reading. It’s a light that changes Jesus, it transfigures him, and it’s a light that we’ve all experienced at different times in our life.

The best example I can remember from my own life, probably took place a long time ago; but it seems like it was only yesterday. I was driving home from work, heading south on Interstate 35, and I was in the middle of a terrible rain storm. The world around me was dark and foreboding. But suddenly, as if I 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 below in a warm glow. And for a few moments, it seemed as if everything was somehow clearer, and more defined.

I’m convinced that what happens in a transfiguration is that we finally get to see something we normally miss, or come to an understanding of something that before was a mystery. But I don’t believe transfigurations add anything that wasn’t there before. Rather, they simply “bring to light” something we simply missed, or overlooked. And in today’s gospel reading, we’re told the story of the transfiguration of Jesus, but I think something else is being revealed to us. What is it that’s being revealed?

Several years ago, at an international conference on religion, an American delegate was talking to a Shinto priest. He said to the priest: “I’ve been to lots a good 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 think we don’t have theology. We dance.”

In today’s gospel reading, we are told that Jesus took Peter, James, and John up a high mountain with him. The exact location is not important; only what was revealed. And what was revealed transcends our theologies, our dogmas, and our doctrines. Because what was revealed in that transfiguration was a dance. In fact, it was *The Dance* between God and his son; a dance witnessed by Elijah and Moses, and three astonished disciples. And rather than offering to build three booths, when the dance had ended the disciples (and we) should just have clapped.

But there’s a problem. Robert Farrar Capon, an author, theologian, and Episcopal priest, claims that the church today suffers from a crippling disability: it has so many different agendas that sap its time and energy, that it’s forgotten how to be astonished. Instead of embracing the astonishment of the

gospel, we have focused on those agendas, and have boarded one of the many ideological busses that run inside every church: Conservative busses, moderate busses, and liberal busses. And what is more, there are new busses pulling up to the curb all the time. In fact, there will always be another bus coming along soon. But even though these ideological fads come and go, the one thing that is at the core of the Christian experience is being astonished by the Gospel.

“We have forfeited,” Capon writes, “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,” Capon insists, “is to recover ‘the coin of astonishment.’”

As the people of God, the church is 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. It’s this experience that the human soul thirsts for: To have a relationship with that Mystery that is the source and sustenance all of existence; a relationship, in other words, that takes us – individually and corporately – beyond all of the ideologies, theologies, doctrines, and dogmas. This is the transfiguration the human heart seeks.

“We need to leave the god that we have created in our own image and likeness,” Meister Eckhart, the 13th-century mystic once wrote, “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.

“Prayer is the gate through which we enter to God,” one 18th-century rabbi told to his followers. “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.”

I think that’s as good a place, as any, to start. Pray in the most open, true, and easy way you can think of. Drop the King James’ verbiage, and 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.

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 to provide a definition of a saint. A saint, he answered, is a person the light shines in 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 shining in the wrong direction. For saints are those people through whom God’s light shines out in 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 through us.