

The View from Here
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Faith Presbyterian Church
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Transfiguration

What would you say if Jesus came up to you and tapped you on the shoulder and said, "Hey, I'm going to hike up that mountain for some quiet time. You want to go with me?" What would you say?

I, for one, find the suggestion of getting away, finding a quiet place, a change of scenery, very attractive.

This past week-end, I met up with my son Cal for my nephew's wedding in Texarkana, Texas. Anyone ever been to Texarkana? As Randy will tell you, there is not much in Texarkana - not much at all! Nonetheless, the weekend excursion offered me a welcome change of scene. For one thing, there was no talk of politics at the wedding. In fact, it was kind of like being in a different world – far removed from the daily grind, the bleary bombardment of bad news, the every-present reminders of what is wrong with the world.

It is comforting, is it not, to know that Jesus may have shared our fatigue with worldly worries? After all, Jesus' daily encounters were with the poor that you have with you always, the demon-possessed and all those despairing women. The woes of the world crowded around Jesus and there was no respite. His feet were covered with the dirt of the world. It must have been oppressive to ever be in demand, to always feel surrounded by hunger and need, to always be reminded of the work to be done as the poet described it:

"And all is seared with trade; bleared, smeared with toil;
And wears man's smudge and shares man's smell; the soil
Is bare now, nor can foot feel, being shod." (Gerard Manley Hopkins)

Yes, our world too is seared with trade, bleared, smeared with toil.

So. If Jesus asks us if we'd like a change of scenery, if we'd like to hike up a mountain, would you stay or would you go?

The fact is, we don't know why only the three went with Jesus: Peter, John, and James. However, I appreciate the possibility that Jesus simply asked who wanted to go hike to a quiet place where they could pray uninterrupted and they were the ones who agreed.

Of course, the irony is, when the four men get to the top of the mountain, they are interrupted. There are other people up there. Moses and Elijah are up there and, doggone it, they are talking! We never get the idea that much praying happens! Isn't that the way life so often goes? Our best laid plans are interrupted and what we'd hoped was going to be quiet solitude gets interrupted.

We have to point out that it is not just anybody who is up there on that mountain. It's none other than Moses and Elijah. They appear just as Jesus has been illuminated – his face shone and his clothes "flashed white like lightening". Moses and Elijah appeared in heavenly splendor too.

Even this occurrence may seem familiar to us. We are in a place where we think we know what to do. We think we know the place. We are praying, maybe, and we are with people we know and it's manageable. Something happens that totally changes the way we see things, the way we see ourselves, the way we see Jesus. It may not have been a blinding light... or maybe it was.

One of my favorite short stories is by Flannery O'Connor and it is about a southern woman who is set in her ways. Her world is predictable and she works hard at keeping it that way – nothing to make her upset, nothing out of order. Blacks are in their place and whites are in their place until one day, out of the blue, just as Mrs. Turpin is doing an ordinary thing – visiting a doctor's office - a young woman has an outburst and throws a book at Mrs. Turpin. When Mrs. Turpin gets home it is if she seeks to put her life back where it should be, predictable. She goes out to feed the pigs and suddenly there is a kind of blinding light and she sees folks in long white robes marching up the heaven....except it is not the way it should be...it is out of order. The people in front of the line are all black! The misfits are also at the front of the line. Mrs. Turpin's world view is transfigured and her tidy order of things is disrupted.

(Revelation)

"The world is charged with the grandeur of God.
It will flame out, like shining from shook foil;
It gathers to a greatness, like the ooze of oil
Crushed."

Sometimes it happens that way...sometimes...if we manage, like Jesus' friends in the story, to stay awake and we are not overcome by sleep. That is the risk for us, it seems, in these days – when we have the chance to get away and we relax. We catch up on our sleep and we can totally miss the shining like shook foil that has the potential to totally change our view of things...from up here.

Peter and his friends see the shining but they respond in predictable fashion. Jesus, they say, it sure is a good thing we are up here! We can build something to contain this experience. We can manage it. We can make it fit our human expectations or order where everyone is where they should be. We want to do something because that is our way to manage the shining shook from foil.

And, that is when the cloud comes! That is when, I figure, God has to say something. The cloud comes and completely covers everyone on the mountain and you can't see anything. Have you ever been swallowed up in fog? Maybe you've been on a plane and one minute you can see the earth below and the next minute all you can see is the dense, impenetrable whiteness, I grew up in Southern California. We'd be at a football game at night watching our team, the Corona Del Mar Sea Kings, and the fog would roll in and you couldn't see a darn thing! We could hear the whistles blowing but we couldn't see anything. The amazing thing to me now is that we stayed for the whole game...in the fog. That is High School for you!

It is no wonder then that Jesus' friends were overcome with awe or fear, as some translations have it. The shining was one thing – they could manage that – or so they thought. The shining. But that cloud, that is a different thing. God is close in the cloud.

My grandmother and I used to have a running debate about where we felt closest to God. My choice was always the ocean. My grandmother on the other hand always went for the mountain...She did have the Bible on her side!

And then....God speaks: "This is my son, my chosen one. Listen to him." It is one thing to see Jesus – to really see him for who he is. It is another thing to listen to him.

Sadly, the disciples, and we, cannot stay up there on the mountain. We have to come down to the world, which is as we left it. The large crowd is waiting. The epileptic boy needs healing. The disciples either couldn't or wouldn't heal him and we are the faithless and crooked generation.

The world is as we left it - still violence-ridden, still rude, still unjust. And Jesus? Jesus will be put to death by this faithless and crooked generation.

It is as if all the shining wore off on the way back down the mountain. All the awe evaporated.

You see, I believe that it wasn't just Jesus who was transfigured up there on the mountain. What difference would it make if it was just Jesus- like a tree in a forest – and no one saw him? I think Peter, John and James were also changed – they had to be – by the reflected light and the sound of god's voice.

However, something happened in the descent. Something happened to cause Jesus' comment on their faithlessness. They lost their shine. They lost their confidence. They lost their vision of who Jesus is. Did they forget what happened and how they felt? Did the misery of the world, like a magic eraser, simply wipe the shine off?

Our task, it seems to me, on this Transfiguration Sunday – the Sunday before we enter the wilderness that is Lent - before we go out into our grimy and hurting world is to remember what we've seen and heard. Our task is to look at ourselves in the mirror and see the incandescent light that Jesus gives to us. I am not talking about a cosmetic blush here. I am not talking about simply putting on a happy face. I am talking about shining with the light of truth. I am talking about shining with the light of justice. I am talking about shining with the light of endurance and courage. Our task this morning is to go out into the world....and shine!