

Into the High Places – Transfiguration C

The purpose of our reading and preaching about holy scripture is, in the elegant phrasing of Cranmer's Advent collect, "...to hear them, to read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest them, that we may embrace and ever hold fast the blessed hope of everlasting life..." We recall that part of what makes the Anglican Church the *via media* (middle way) is the conviction that our beliefs and practices must derive from a thorough integration of that three-legged stool we talked about last week: scripture, tradition and reason. Though it is impossible to achieve perfect equilibrium, we are teaching and living heresy if we stress one of these three such that it obscures the others. Our way of doing this should involve exposure to and tolerance of a wide spectrum of theological belief and traditional opinion, as well as bold and searching talk about how the stories of faith history enable us to think about, understand and formulate the stories of our own experience.

Today's readings are a perfect example of the process of marking and digesting the old as a way of incorporating the new. If we would comprehend Jesus as the totality of the law and the prophets, we would do well to show how he embodies the greatest attributes of traditional heroes of the faith. Moses represents the law, so Jesus on the mountaintop shines just like Moses. Elijah was the quintessential prophet; thus Jesus will be whooshed up into heaven just like him.

When we picture this great scene on the mountaintop, with the small group of apostles witnessing the encounter

among Jesus, Moses and Elijah, we infer that Jesus has all the attributes of the other two combined. He represents the culmination of the stories of the law and the prophets, and now he is taking over from them for the next era of humanity's relationship with God Almighty.

Certainly, that is Saint Paul's way of looking at things, as we just heard: "We act with great boldness, not like Moses, who put a veil over his face to keep the people of Israel from gazing at the glory because their minds were hardened. When they hear the reading of the old covenant, that same veil is still there, since only in Christ is it set aside. All of us, on the other hand, are seeing with unveiled faces, the glory of the Lord as though we were reflected in a mirror. And we are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another." That sounds like prayerful, if not wishful, thinking on Paul's part, who was at times too eager to do away with his old self and not curious enough about the salvation history that produced him. Nevertheless, 'changed from glory into glory' is the life we witness and may choose.

Today we are summoned to go to that elevated place of seclusion, suitable for divine self-disclosure, to follow Jesus and Peter, James and John and to experience again – as if for the first time – this most mysterious and dazzling of revelations. The only thing we are asked to bring with us up the mountain is our imagination and a childlike openness to wonder.

St. Augustine once asked himself what God was doing before creating heaven and earth. He decided that God was

making hell for minds that pry. To climb the mountain, therefore, with prying minds hell-bent on debunking the mystical or disproving the miraculous is akin to killing something to see how it's made. What occurred on the mountain surpasses institutional practices and intellectual categories. In the season of Epiphany, as H. K. Oehmig has so gracefully put it, "...this season of the showing forth of God in Christ, the begetting of the story has developed into the beholding of it." The beholding of it by the apostles on Mount Tabor is the result, and by any of us with hearts to hear and souls to see.

Just as Joseph was revealed to his brothers in his miraculous rebirth of forgiveness and plenty, Jesus is "shown forth" for what God really is, the One who comes into our world that we might enter the sacred and eternal habitat ourselves. This inbreaking of the holy, wherein the invisible becomes visible, is what led Thomas Aquinas to remark, "I have seen things that make all my writing seem like straw."

In the Transfiguration, Jesus in his altered form represents what Joseph Campbell called the paradox of two worlds in one. Revelation, in the economy of God is always purposeful. Just as the awesome voice had spoken to Jesus at his baptism, affirming for him the arduous ministry that lay ahead, so now the voice is addressed to these three prominent Apostles, who will become the leadership of the Jerusalem church.

The manner in which these events take place is, perhaps difficult to fathom or believe, but it doesn't matter so much. The meaning of the story: the resulting

metamorphosis that takes place in Peter, James and John when Christ's glory is revealed is what is important here. Their new condition is an awakened state, marked by an awareness of God's presence here and now. This thrusts them into a new life, where everything that is, every being they encounter is an extension and revelation of holy truth.

In Mary Zimmerman's play *Metamorphoses*, the Woman speaks of the consciousness she longs for: "Bodies, I have in mind, and how they can change to assume new shapes – I ask the help of the gods, who know the trick: change me, and let me glimpse the secret and speak, better than I know how, of the world's birthing, and the creation of all things, from the very first to the very latest."

She prays to be thrust into a new life. Again paradoxically, it is a life at once more disciplined and more free. One becomes conscious of the vastness of creation and our relative insignificance on the one hand, and the complete and individualized freedom to love we have been given in our humanity on the other.

We have heard – perhaps we have said – the prayer: "Please answer me, God; why are you so silent." Yet whenever we have seen love and humility in action and have given ourselves up to its power, we know our prayers are heard and thereby answered. Surrender to prevail is the whole game, or, as Gandhi was known to say, "God speaks to us every day, but we rarely listen."

Luke's literary touch is especially deft: although we talk about today's feast as "The Transfiguration of Jesus," because the other two synoptic Gospels say he

was transfigured (metamorphoo in the Greek), Luke describes the scene thus: “...the appearance of his face changed, and his clothes became dazzling white...Peter and his companions were weighed down with sleep; but since they had stayed awake, they saw his glory and the two men who stood with him.” In other words, Jesus did not change, rather, his true identity became apparent to them because they stayed awake. Such a revelation, whether by vision or some other means, is the beginning of the transformation of all who choose to follow him.

No wonder good old Peter wanted to put up some all-weather shelters and preserve the moment permanently. It’s something we have been doing ever since. But notice Jesus does not permit it. Instead he immediately goes back to the work of healing. If we are transformed or metamorphood, even if we start to shine and our garments glister, if we begin to be changed by our encounters with the living God, we too must resist the temptation to merely preserve the awareness of power and glory and instead employ it for the work of healing one another; to get out and start rebuking some demons ourselves.