

SERMON – “YOU HAD TO BE THERE!” – FEBRUARY 23, 2009

Scripture: II Kings 2: 1-12 Mark 9: 2-9

A few weeks ago we had one of those dreaded snow storms followed by rain. As the sun came up the next morning, it was magical to look out in the backyard and see the trees glistening! Of course, the first inclination was to capture it with a photo – but with these amateur eyes, it’s never quite the same. And imagine trying to describe it to someone who has never experienced ice and snow. You had to be there!

This morning’s scriptures are both “You had to be there!” stories. Each year, this last Sunday of the season of Epiphany, and the Sunday before Lent begins, we revisit this transfiguration story in each of the gospels. Jesus seen in all his glory! But it tends to leave us asking, “What was going on?” Was it “real”? Was it a dream?

This year, tied to the transfiguration story of Jesus, is the fantastical story of Elijah, the prophet, being taken up to heaven with chariots of fire as witnessed by Elisha, his protégé. It’s another one of those “You had to be there” stories.

One preacher, a few years ago, tried to capture the feeling of the transfiguration in verse. It is long and so I won’t read all of it, but it went this way:

Transfiguration - Ted Huffmann
(excerpts)

It was amazing!
Incredible!
Wonderful!
Stupendous!
Awesome!
Electrifying!
Awe-full!
Inexplicable!
Remarkable!
Powerful!
Unbelievable — no, that’s not right.
Not quite right.

His clothes were brilliant!
Dazzling!
Sparkling!
Luminescent!
Beaming!
Glowing~
Snazzy!
Jazzy!

Wonderful!
Unforgettable!
Bright — no, that’s not right.
Not quite right.

They were speaking,
Sharing,
Chatting
Discussing,
Recalling,
Lecturing,
Pontificating,
Storytelling,
Reminiscing,
Communing,
Talking - no, that’s not right.
Not quite right.
The witnesses were frightened,
Speechless,
Scared,
Incredulous,
Terrified,
Awe struck,
Shaking,

Quaking,
Wondering,
Rumbling,
Dumbstruck — no, that's not right.
Not quite right.

The voice from heaven was bold,
Gentle,
Booming,
Loving,
Overwhelming,
Powerful,
Other-worldly,
Mysterious,
Incredible,
Surprising,
Familiar — no that's not right.
Not quite right.

The problem is,
And has always been
Transfiguration is beyond the
power of words to express,
Beyond our ability to describe or tell,
Yet the event was too amazing!
For silence.
It must be told.

No wonder Jesus told them not to
tell just then.
No wonder they couldn't begin to

keep it in,
But what words to speak?
What words to express?
What description to use?
They had to tell the story again
And again
And again:

In one moment
Exactly how long we cannot say

In one brilliant moment
A mountaintop moment
We began to understand
To really comprehend
It's not about us
It's not about us!
Not our time
Our space

Our perspective
Our vision
Our viewpoint
Our hopes
Our dreams
Our fears
Our pain
Our sorrows
It's not about us alone.
It's not about us alone.

In his book, *Whistling in the Dark (1998)*, Frederick Buechner muses on the Transfiguration this way: [In the Transfiguration] it was the holiness of Jesus shining through his humanness, his face so afire with it that they were almost blinded. Even with us something like that happens once in a while. The face of a man walking with his child in the park, of a woman picking peas in a garden, of sometimes even the unlikeliest person listening to a concert, say, or standing barefoot in the sand watching the waves roll in... Every once and so often, something so touching, so incandescent, so alive transfigures the human face that it's almost beyond bearing”.

Have you seen that kind of glory? Felt that kind of presence of God? Have you tried to describe it? It is so hard!

I've probably told this story before because it was a quintessential event in my life. When I was about 18, I was off at a retreat with a group that were insisting that I see the Bible a whole lot more literally than my understanding. I was disturbed enough by the conversations that I couldn't go to sleep and went out and sat on a rock for what seemed like many hours. In that time, I had a “God” moment. I felt God's presence so strongly and felt so affirmed and even heard words that affirmed “my questions”. It was so vivid but really so hard to describe with adequate words. I remember going home and trying to describe what happened to a current boyfriend, and he just smiled with somewhat of a cringe and said “Don't get too carried away!”

Part of my problem may have been in the timing of the telling. Sometimes an experience is just too fresh to tell. At that first moment, I needed to tell it because I was bursting with joy, but was the recipient ready to hear. I've told my story many times since that first revelation and time has given it a different quality.

Think about the disciples. They were quite overwhelmed – of course, Peter wanted to take immediate action and it was all wrong – it wasn't an event to be captured and memorialized but rather to be savored and lived with and with time, might come understanding. It most likely needed the experience of resurrection to ultimately find its way into the stories told about Jesus. It was important for Peter and James and John to have that mountaintop experience. It wasn't important for them to tell the story, not yet; that wasn't the point of their outing. But the experience would work on them, shape them, and continue to transform and perhaps even transfigure them. The knowledge they carried would alter every future encounter: with Jesus, their fellow disciples; and with those to whom they ministered.

Some of us have read “The Shack” by William P. Young – it was our book study for last month. It is a novel about Mack who has had this incredible meeting with God – Three in One—in the midst of working through the terrible tragic disappearance of his daughter, Missy. It's an unbelievable story and yet, as we talked about it, we had stories of God encounters of our own to tell. So, they happen. The book has been a best seller for many weeks – a first novel by a totally unknown author originally written as a story for his

children, privately published, sold out and then taken on by a publisher. It captures something of this yearning for God – this word that God is most present in the midst of our lives. It's not great writing, but there is something in the telling that is touching lives. It has been transforming and yet, kind of all the way through, there is this quality of "You had to be there!"

Those encounter moments or brief and like that ice on the trees quickly disappeared. So when they come – whether in the awesome experience of a moment of nature, or the brush of the presence of God when we feel alone, or the feeling of assurance when things are falling apart. We can't stay basking in the beauty or feeling of the moment, but rather need to return to the living out our faith off the mountain and in the valleys. This was the turning point for Jesus. We have moved from the ministry of Galilee to the journey to the cross. He has predicted his death and resurrection three times but it hasn't been heard. For Peter and James and John at least, they may see the events ahead in a new light.

We have the story and so as we enter this Lenten season, may our sense of the holy draw us closer to the meaning of the cross in our lives .