

St. Andrew's Cathedral

Jackson, Mississippi

Sermon for March 3, 2019 ~ Last Sunday After the Epiphany

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The Feast of the Transfiguration has been celebrated in at least some part of the Church since early in the 4th century. In the 10th Century, its celebration on August 6 began in England and Pope Callixtus III made August 6 the feast day throughout the Universal Church in 1456. We celebrate that shining moment on the mountain top when Peter, James, and John saw Jesus in a dazzling new light, in a new way, and realized his divine role was unfolding before their eyes in the fulfillment of the Law and the Prophets.

Since August 6 seldom falls on a Sunday, it is easy to forget the Feast of the Transfiguration. Perhaps that is why those who prepared the Revised Common Lectionary placed it on the Last Sunday After the Epiphany in each of the three years of the lectionary. There it stands as the climactic grand epiphany of Jesus as Messiah, the one sent to fulfill the Law and the Prophets.

Peter, James, and John went up the mountain with Jesus on that occasion. They were frightened by the possibility of too much joy. For the transfiguration was an affirmation of Jesus, a hint of the unimaginable, a foreshadowing of the boundless life of the Christ of God.

They, of course, resisted the experience. Afraid of the intensity, of the unknown, of life and power so beyond their own, they backed away. On the brink of an encounter that offered them a new vision of reality, they hid their faces.

On our own mountains of experience we are no different. The unknown frightens us, the unfamiliar discomfords us, even with the offer of new life. Encountering great love or deep emotion, we fear lack of control and loss of self, so we use speech to dispel the experience and regain solid footing. We are afraid of seeing in a new way someone we have neatly classified – afraid of having our minds changed, our hearts moved, our soul turned inside out. Comfortable with our everyday, slightly despised mediocrity, we shy away from revelations of the intimate closeness of the transcendent God.

We are earthen vessels. Jesus was a crystal vial. Infinitely more transparent and sensitive to the Spirit than we, he emanated the brilliant radiance of that presence and the Divine Voice proclaimed, “This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!” Such affirmation as a beloved Son must have served him in the moment of anguish and apparent abandonment on the cross, which he would soon experience.

This gospel reminds us of transfigurations in our own lives. These are the moments, always pure gift, never earned and never manufactured, when we are aware of God's presence and power - that time after a death when we know with certainty that the one we love is alive, still near us and loving us; the time of prayer - given once or often in a lifetime - when God takes over and we know with the knowledge of experience that “it is an awful thing to fall into the hands of the living God”; the times of intimacy so intense that boundaries between two people melt.

Perhaps the one transfigurative moment that stands out the most for me is my walk on the Cathedral Labyrinth at New Harmony, Indiana. I went out to it somewhat early in the morning, hoping I would be all alone. I had prepared myself and had chosen a psalm verse to repeat as I walked into the labyrinth's center. However, I was not able to select a verse to repeat on the way out. Everything seemed set. I took off my sandals and stepped barefoot onto the granite surface of the labyrinth.

When the heat of the granite finally became so intense on my feet that I couldn't concentrate on the verse, I stepped off and put my sandals back on. I returned to the place I had been and resumed the walk, repeating the psalm verse as I walked: "Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts."

A few minutes later the cast of "Indiana Vacation" showed up in a station wagon. Mom, dad, and somewhere between three and fifty children emptied out. They ran with unrestrained exuberance into the garden surrounding the labyrinth. I continued the psalm verse with greater intensity, hoping that would help me overcome my irritation. Then, dad's cell phone rang and he answered it. Must have been five or six bars! My cell phone didn't work at New Harmony but his did and he carried on a lively conversation about his business back wherever home was. The children, meanwhile, thought a game of chase on the maze, as they called it, would be in order.

I continued to repeat the verse. I reached the center of the labyrinth about the time dad concluded his cell phone call and the children, tired of their game, led their parents out of the garden, back into the station wagon, and they roared off in a cloud of dust.

I was alone again. Not at peace. But alone, nevertheless. What did I do now? I didn't come in with a verse to repeat on my way out. So I stood still and waited. You'd all be surprised at the patience. And, suddenly, I was given what I needed to lead me back out to the world I had left behind. Our Lord's Summary of the Law, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind. You shall love your neighbor as yourself."

With that in my heart and on my lips, I suddenly understood something. I saw some things in a new light, starting with the temporary interruption of my spiritual exercise by the hot surface of the labyrinth, and, more importantly, the disrespectful, disruptive, unconscious family that intruded upon my meditative walk. They are part of my world and there are more of them where they came from. I am not exempt from loving them as I love God and as I love myself. God provided the illumination for the path I was to walk from the center of that labyrinth, to the center of this chancel, to the center of the life of the world in which I am called to be a priest of the Church of God. That shining moment, filled with the glorious light of Christ, transfigured the path I walk and the people who walk it with me. I guess it was easy to think about the concept of loving there in that blissful setting. It would have been nice to stay there.

We cannot remain on the mountain. The apostles didn't set up tents, despite Peter's suggestion. Luke says of the apostle's attempt to hold on to the moment, "He did not know that he was saying." They and we are given fleeting glimpses of glory, of what is possible but not yet permanent. I'll continue to try, holding that mountaintop experience in my heart and praying that it will influence my actions more and more each day, transforming that which is *disfigured* into that which is *transfigured* in the light of the glory of God.

Jesus was again the one they knew, the hidden God, incarnate for us in daily events and dull people. Like the disciples, we cannot live on the mountain but must be ready to follow Jesus there when he invites us, for our hearts are expanded and prepared for resurrection through the small transfigurations along the way.