

On Being Transfigured
Mark 9.2-10
Transfiguration Sunday + 21st Annual Jazz Worship
Sunday, February 15, 2015
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Today is one of those days that promises to be really good. This entire weekend has been sprinkled with moments that feel like all is as it should be. The sky shines bright blue, the weather's not too hot and not too cold. Work is on hold in a way very few cities in the world get to experience. It's a season of play. We step out into the street, everyone on foot. Neighbors gather and share from their abundance—food and drink are plentiful, laughter even moreso. Children run and dance, everyone is breathing a little easier and hoping this moment will stretch out just a little bit longer. It's not about the beads or the floats or the bands or the krewes. It's about that moment when the energy of the whole thing itself allows us to glimpse the life we really want.

We know we're going to head back to our ordinary routine even if we don't want to. We're going to climb back inside our cars and back inside our houses and back behind our computers and our phone screens. And no matter how many pictures we take, we can't stop the clock on that "just right" intersection. We know that even the moments that feel so pure and so right are interrupted by violence; reminders that this world is not as it should be. And reminders all-the-more that we need to pay attention to the goodness that we encounter when we join together in celebration and rest.

Something happens out there during these days of revelry that bears the essence of how we really want to live: in harmony with our neighbors, daring to be our fullest selves, letting our guard down, sharing easily, breathing deeply, moving slowly, delighting in each other and in this place, knowing that THIS moment is the only one where we have to be.

In the church calendar, this is the Sunday set aside for marking a particularly odd and mysterious story of Jesus climbing a mountain to a high place and being transfigured as his companions watched. Peter, James, and John are there. Jesus begins to shine, his clothes are brilliant white like no person could create, describes the gospel writer. Then Elijah and Moses, who each had their own shining moments with God but are now long since dead, somehow appear in this high place with them.

The high place was considered a point nearest heaven. It's the same idea as a "thin place" that separates this realm from the next except you could actually climb up one and hope for a sense of God. Somehow this group encounters God in such a way that the lines start to blur, and everything is changed.

We don't understand transfiguration beyond the stuff of Harry Potter, and this story may only confuse us further. Though we may not understand or even dare to believe in what this story claims, we know that whatever happened up there, Peter wants to mark it. He seems to want to make it last, stay awhile in this fantastical place, maybe even reorder the world around this Divine Presence that takes away darkness and leaves only brilliant light.

There's also the chance that Peter wanted to contain that power to keep it away, keep it in its place, keep it a safe distance from him. He may have thought he wanted to draw near

to God's presence until the glowing and the visiting happened. Maybe he's trying to build a little distance between all of them now that they've gotten so close.

"I suspect that as much as we want an encounter with God," writes David Lose, "we simultaneously fear the presence of God because we fear being changed, being transformed. What we have, who we are, may not be everything we want, but at least we know it, are used to it, have built a relatively orderly life around it. And so when God comes – perhaps not in a transfiguration as dramatic as Mark describes but in the ordinary hopes, encounters, and tragedies of our everyday life – when God comes and unsettles the orderly lives we've constructed we try to put those disruptive experiences back into line."

When we get a glimpse of the wonder and the mystery of the Divine, we do not always have words to describe what we are experiencing. That can be liberating and terrifying. We can feel that we've discovered our truest, best selves or walked into something that seems too irrational to be trusted.

I suspect, however, that "regardless of the terminology we choose to use" we "desire to experience transfiguration here and now." In her study of the growing movement of those who claim a spiritual-but-not-religious identity, Karoline Lewis realized, "In the end, we [all] want a sense of the transcendent, the numinous, the holy, something outside of ourselves that is the cause for awe and wonder."

We want to know that unexpected, brilliant transformation is possible in our lives. When Peter experiences this dramatic moment he wants to capture it. Now when we read this text, we may not get what it is he wanted to capture. But remember the feeling of the all-is-as-it-should-be day that makes us hope in our neighbors and delight in our families. Peter wants to hold onto that and maybe even make a new world out of it because it feels that powerfully good.

In "Mary Gordon's meditations on this story, she cites a translation of Matthew's version that has God saying, 'This is my beloved son in whom I take delight.' At the Transfiguration, then, 'we are in the presence of delight. Delight is an aspect of the holy.'² The Transfiguration...is tender holiness. The scene is a reminder that holiness, as a characteristic of God, is participatory and shared. God loves," God delights, God interacts.¹

Then just as Peter has his hammer at the ready and is going to honor this brief glimpse when heaven and earth seem to brush against each other, it's over. The scene returns to just the four companions, and Jesus begins to guide them back down to life as usual. Add to that the request to keep quiet, and it's almost tragic to imagine Peter's let down. But it's only another step or two before Peter, James, and John are talking about all of it again. What could this mean? What just happened? What are we supposed to do with that?

We have these questions, too. We need places, writes David Lose, where "we meet up to share our stories of wonder and worry and hope and disappointment and stand with each other as the God of Moses and Elijah and Jesus draws near once again to unsettle our plans and meet us in the mystery of God's love." We need places of delight. We need places that are so thin we suspect there's something more we could almost reach.

¹ via Matt Skinner

My congregation is one that seeks to be that kind of place. Ray's is a congregation that seeks to be that kind of place. Your kitchen table can also be that kind of place. When we cease to gather on the neutral ground with our picnics and our ladders, we need not disappear into our homes and behind our computers. We can carry the best of the moments we experience together into the ordinariness of our lives. There's a risk and a promise of vulnerability and transformation that awaits us if we are willing to live together in such a way that the thin places and the high places of God's divine presence become known to us. The love and delight of God are a mystery, to be sure, but they are not so far away. May you be surprised by that presence. May you be caught up in God's goodness. May you find a welcome table to sit and share a cup of coffee and your questions and your life. May you be transformed.