EPIPHANY LAST/TRANSFIGURATION

Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and John, and led them up a high mountain apart, by themselves. And he was transfigured before them, and his clothes became dazzling white, such as no one on earth could bleach them. Mark 9:2-3

The Sunday of the Transfiguration. The last Sunday of Epiphany. The Sunday before Ash Wednesday, and the somber, sacred, penitential season of Lent. And the story of Jesus high up on a mountain, altered momentarily in some dramatic, sensational way. The appearance of some magisterial, monumental, long-dead prophets, leading heroes in the story of salvation history. And a voice coming out of an overshadowing cloud, a voice uttering the astounding, definitive, declaration, *This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!*

A spectacular story, certainly. An unforgettable, special effects story. But what do we make of it? What does it have to do with us? Two weeks ago I talked about the theological designations of a *vertical* God – the God *up there*– and a *horizontal* God, the God in-this-world, the God shoulder-to-shoulder. And about the designations of *transcendent*– overarching, out there, over all, and *immanent*– among us, here with us, here in us.

The story of the Transfiguration seems to feature a God who is very vertical and very transcendent – very up there, out there, and unimaginably remote, mysterious, and powerful. And if you are like me, more comfortable or familiar with a God who is more intimate, more earthly, more subtle, perhaps, the God of this story may seem alien and forbidding. And what happens to Jesus may seem magical, unbelievable, and therefore unhelpful. What can we do with this final Epiphany story – this final manifestation of the Godhead that is our transition into Lent?

The story of the Transfiguration is a mythological story. What do I mean by that? I remember, in my first years of ordination, my boss said in a sermon that the Crucifixion was a myth. The Junior Warden asked for a meeting with me to discuss this. She was very upset. She thought that the rector was using *myth* the way we use it in the vernacular; we say about some incredible tale or disproven falsehood, *Oh, that's just a myth.* So, the Junior Warden thought her rector was saying that the Crucifixion never happened, and that was a challenge to her faith.

I told her that I believed the rector was using the word *myth* in a more technical sense: *myth* as a foundational story, myth that explains a central truth about human

nature. We all studied Greek myths at one time or another, and we remember that while much of what happens in those stories is literally unbelievable, they embody deep and perceptive accounts of human behavior, human feelings, and human relationships. The gods may be the main characters, but they have all the attributes of ourselves: pride, jealousy, susceptibility to uncontrollable lust and passion, a hunger for power, as well as – sometimes – generosity, courage, insight, and so forth. The myths may be "fiction" as we understand it, but, like all good fiction, they embody truths that lie deeper than mere facts.

Now, the mere fact of the Crucifixion is historical. One of the very few things we know for sure about the historical Jesus is that he died on a cross. So what did my rector mean back then? He meant that the story of the Crucifixion tells a truth far deeper than the mere facts of history: it tells what happens when people of principal and radical conviction, people who are committed at their core to the struggle for peace and justice in this world – what happens when such people go up against systems of power and privilege. Those people suffer. They may not all die, but they pay a heavy cost for their commitment. That's the myth, the *truth,* of the Crucifixion. We pay a price in the struggle to bring the realm of God to earth.

Well, then, what's the myth of the Transfiguration? I have said that this is the story that takes us from the Epiphany – the time of the manifestation of the Incarnation, the time that celebrates God's appearance among us – takes us into our Lenten journey. And that journey involves accompanying Jesus as he sets his face toward Jerusalem. In Mark's story, Jesus comes down from the mountain and does a bit of teaching and healing, predicts his death ,and then takes off promptly for Jerusalem, where he knows he will die.

So the story is a story of change –change of understanding, change of direction, change of purpose. Jesus has spent three years of earthly ministry, more or less, and now he is on his way to fulfill his ultimate destiny. What happens on the mountain is a pivot, a hinge, an event that transforms Jesus and his closest followers.

Jesus is transfigured, that's what Mark tells us. He is changed, visibly, dramatically, momentarily. He is lit up from within, as it were. And the change is strikingly apparent to the men who are with him. They see that Jesus is radically altered. They see it, and they are terrified, and they don't know the meaning of what they are seeing, how to interpret it. So God tells them: *This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him.*

And they get it, apparently. They need to get it, if they are to have the resolve to follow Jesus on the road to death. So not only is Jesus changed, but they are changed as well.

However, and this is a critical part of the story, and one of my favorite moments, when the disciples are seeing the change, seeing Jesus not only lit up with unearthly brilliance but accompanied by two impossible companions, before God intervenes with a stentorian proclamation, what do they want to do? They want to build three booths, three boxes, one for Jesus and one for each of the prophets. They want to box in what they are seeing. They want to tame the wild supernaturalism of this event. They want to *contain change*, contain transformation, *contain* mystery.

So, again we return to the question, what does this have to do with us? Well, I believe we all have transformational moments in our lives. We all have times that are pivotal, that turn us from one direction to another, in which we are changed. We all have moments that work as hinges between one chapter of our lives and the next.

Sometimes, those moments are dramatic. We feel them as they are happening. They may be moments of formal transition: marriage, divorce, the birth of a child, the death of a parent, a change in job or career. We are aware that our lives will never, somehow, be quite the same.

Much more often, I think, we recognize such moments not as they are occurring, but in retrospect. We look back, and we are able to say from a different perspective, *oh, that was a critical moment, That was when things changed for me, when I was changed.* And much more often, as well, changes in us occur not in dramatic and spectacular moments, but gradually, subtly, over time. But we *do* change, and again, we will look back at some point and say, *oh, that was when I began to be a different person, to go in a new direction.*

The myth of the Transfiguration, the deep human truth of the story, is that change happens to all of us, my dear friends. Not so often with brilliant spotlights and booming voices as accompaniment. But we do change. In that, we resemble Jesus of Nazareth who, we say, was God incarnate, the God who walks among us.

And like Jesus, when we change we do not leave all of our old lives, our old selves, behind. Jesus goes down from the mountain changed, but taking with him all the earthly wisdom and experience he has earned to date as he heads toward his final destination. Change does not mean losing all that we had before. Generally, hopefully, humanly, we carry the best of who we have been forward in some new direction.

Another truth of the story of the Transfiguration is that when we undergo change and transformation, other people see it. Sometimes they see it before we do. Sometimes they are forcibly struck by what they see. Sometimes they don't like it. Sometimes they are threatened by the changes in us, as the disciples are initially threatened by what they see on the mountaintop. And sometimes, also like the disciples, others will try to contain the changes in us, try to box us in, try to keep everything the way it was.

But if the changes in us reflect spiritual progress, as we pray they do, then we must resist the forces that would keep us contained in old ways, that would seek to prevent our further growth and development. We can't rely on any authoritative voice from a cloud instructing the doubters to get over it. We must rely on our inner convictions for that, and rely as well on the support and encouragement of those who accompany and sustain us on our spiritual journey through life.

And it's worth remarking that as people recognize changes in us, and react to those changes, and reflect those changes – all of those responses from those around us become part of our changing selves. We live in relationship, in connection with those around us, as Jesus lived in relationship with his disciples and with so many others whose lives he touched and whose lives touched him. It is those relationships and connections, after all, with each other, with ourselves, and with God, that go into our transformation, that carry us forward in our lives' journeys.

Perhaps we can incorporate into our Lenten journeys this year – individually and collectively– some times of reflection about change in our lives, and in our communities. What have been our pivotal moments of transition, of transformation, of transfiguration? In our personal lives? In our life in community? Perhaps we can incorporate such reflections into our private and public prayer as we move through Lent toward the sacred mysteries of Holy Week, our journey with Jesus toward Jerusalem.

And as we embark upon that solemn and sometimes lonely journey let us never forget what God tells Jesus and the disciples on the mountaintop, a message meant for all of us as well. *This is my beloved.* We are God's *beloved,* all of us, every one. And that's the Gospel, my dear friends. Alleluia! Alleluia! Amen.