

I speak to you in the name of God, Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer. *Amen.*

In the past couple of days, several of my clergy colleagues have made me laugh at their common Facebook posts. It says this: “You should be as excited about church as about the Super Bowl. So when your pastor makes a point this Sunday, pour Gatorade on his head.” Don’t get any ideas about carrying through with this suggestion. It does say “his” head, not hers. Otherwise, the point is well made, and today is a good day to be excited about church. We have coffee hour after the 8:00 service, potluck after the 10:30 service, and today we celebrate the Feast of the Transfiguration, that mystical mountaintop event that was yet another step for Jesus on the way to his passion, resurrection, and ascension.

Today is a shift for us, like a hinge between the season of light that began when the magi followed the star to the Baby Jesus. There’s plenty of light in today’s lessons, but it’s a different kind of light than the star that guided the magi. It shines from Moses’ face when he sees God; and it’s reflected in the dazzling white of Jesus’ clothes as he prayed. A transfiguration is a metamorphosis, a change of form, structure, or substance, especially by spiritual means. It’s very personal. Transfiguration occurs not because of what we see, but because of what we experience.

A story is told about Napoleon during the invasion of Russia.<sup>1</sup> Somehow separated from his men, he was spotted by his enemies and chased through winding streets as he ran for his life from the Russian Cossacks. Eventually he ducked into a furrier’s shop, gasping for air and talking at the same time as he begged the shopkeeper to save him. The furrier said, “Quick! Hide under this big pile of furs in the corner.” Then the furrier made the pile even larger by throwing more furs on top of Napoleon. No sooner had he finished when the Cossacks burst into the shop. “Where is he?” they demanded to know. The furrier denied knowing what they were talking about, but the Cossacks didn’t believe him and tore the shop apart looking for Napoleon. They tried poking into the pile of furs with their swords, but didn’t find him. Finally they gave up and left.

Sometime later, Napoleon crawled out from under the furs, unharmed, and soon his personal guards came into the shop. Before they left, the furrier innocently asked Napoleon, “Excuse me for asking this question of such a great man, but what was it like to be under the furs, knowing that the next moment could surely be your last?” Napoleon became indignant. “How dare you ask such a question of the Emperor Napoleon?” he demanded. Then, reportedly, he ordered his guards immediately to blindfold the furrier and execute him. The furrier was dragged out of the shop, blindfolded, and placed against the outside wall. The terrified man could see nothing, but he could hear the guards shuffling into a line and preparing their rifles. Then he heard Napoleon shout “Ready!”

In that moment a feeling the shopkeeper could not describe welled up within him. Tears poured down his cheeks. “Aim!” But suddenly the blindfold was stripped from his eyes. The great Napoleon stood before him. They were face to face, eye to eye, when Napoleon said, “Now you know the answer to your question.”

If the furrier hadn’t experienced what Napoleon experienced, he never could have understood how Napoleon felt. It’s no wonder the Israelites were frightened when they saw Moses, or that the disciples were confused and uncertain at our Lord’s transfiguration. It didn’t *happen* to any of them—it happened to someone else. They couldn’t understand it or know how it felt because they only saw it. What is at the center of the transfiguration of our Lord, and what also caused the

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<sup>1</sup> Synthesis, Year C, Last Epiphany February 10, 2013, Postscript.

change in Moses' appearance was the result of a one-on-one interaction with God; the result of a relationship that was already in place, a personal relationship with God.

What exactly does that mean—a personal relationship with God? Probably different things to different people; but a hymn we sang at Sam Ayers' memorial service yesterday says something about that:

I come to the garden alone,  
While the dew is still on the roses,  
And the voice I hear falling on my ear  
The Son of God discloses.

And He walks with me, and He talks with me,  
And He tells me I am His own;  
And the joy we share as we tarry there,  
None other has ever known.

That hymn speaks of Jesus in a very personal way, as if he were alive and present. For some that is true; Jesus is the unseen guest at every meal and the silent listener to every conversation. Those who know him in that way also recognize that he is not always unseen nor always silent. We live in a time, unfortunately, when “a personal relationship with God” might be construed as a doctrine and practice that is more fundamental than our own, an age when “spiritual, but not religious” is more acceptable to many people than following Christ through the doctrines of any particular church. The phrase “spiritual not religious” is heard a lot these days, particularly from people who believe in God but take issue with the stated beliefs and practices of organized religion. And that's interesting, I think, because when you look up the definition of spiritual or spirituality, you'll see that among its meanings is the relationship to religion or religious beliefs.

In my own understanding, spirituality involves a personal, interior practice of faith and devotion, whereas religion is often expressed in an outward manner, as we come together for worship, for example. Sometimes we get confused by considering spirituality and religion to be one and the same. But in my own experience each complements the other. Without spirituality, religion is an empty practice; without religion, spirituality can become narrow and unfulfilled. A healthy church needs both and fosters spirituality, offering opportunities not only for bible study, but for personal growth along one's journey with Christ, ways to connect knowledge and understanding and practice.

Now what does this have to do with transfiguration, you may wonder. Remember that transfiguration involves personal experience. At the time of Moses' transfiguration, he was in frequent conversation with God. The Israelites were not; they depended on Moses to be their translator and interpreter, and so the shining of Moses' face frightened them because they didn't know what caused it. Jesus' own face changed and his clothes became dazzling white while he was in prayer. The disciples weren't praying! They were trying to stay awake, and so they were confused and terrified at the changes in our Lord's physical appearance. Like the Israelites, they were still learning about God and relied on Jesus to convey God's teachings to them. Perhaps God was not yet personal to either the Israelites or the disciples; perhaps they had not yet reached the spiritual maturity that could lead to their own transfigurations. They may have been transformed by what they saw, but they were not transfigured. They could not understand what was happening.

There are reasons why the Last Sunday after the Epiphany, the last Sunday before Lent, brings us the story of the transfiguration. One of those is surely the opportunities Lent presents for us to know our God in Christ more deeply, more personally than we can ever know him just by coming to church on Sunday. Lent is a time for us to seek Christ more intentionally, to rely on God more specifically, to allow ourselves to be transfigured, if not in form at least in substance. As Bishop Taylor wrote in his weekly reflection, “we are all meant to shine, as children do. We were born to make manifest the glory of God that is within us.” And so we pray: remove the veil from our faces, Lord, that we may see you more clearly and know you more dearly. *Amen.*