



TRINITY EPISCOPAL CHURCH

on the Branford Green

May you find Christ, Community and Compassion within these historic walls.

A Transformation Of Us All

By The Rev. Sharon Gracen

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Peter and James and John had been walking with Jesus for a long time. Ever since he had invited them to leave their lives as fishermen on the Sea of Galilee, they had seen him, up close and personal. They knew his moods, what he liked to eat; they knew whether or not he snored when they were sleeping out under the stars on their way to the next stop. They were immersed in the personal, human Jesus. What they got on the mountain was the bigger view. They were offered the chance to see how the small, daily pieces of Jesus fit together in the grand, glorious scheme of Christ.

Preachers sometimes approach Transfiguration Sunday, with a bit of weariness, it's one of those days that we can't escape and there is pressure to be original and meaningful with a rather odd story. The Transfiguration is often treated as an either/or proposition. As if Jesus and his companions could have either the Mountaintop or the real life but not both. I know that I have been guilty of that myself, looking only at the experience through the eyes of the cowering disciples or for Jesus having to leave the glory behind on the mountain and climb down to the road that would eventually take him to the cross.

So I was procrastinating all week with this sermon because there just wasn't any inspiration and then suddenly, mercifully on Friday, some pieces came together. Since occupying this pulpit, I have on many occasions lifted up the wisdom of Teilhard de Chardin's observation that we are not human beings seeking a spiritual experience; we are spiritual beings having a human experience. When most people hear this for the first time, they pause, trying to make the shift necessary to think in such a way and see things from that perspective. It's a bit of a head scratcher. But late this week, the lights came on for me and I realized that the story of Jesus' transfiguration on the mountain is the story that best illustrates de Chardin's teaching. Jesus is the prototype of humanity, the original spiritual being, the Word who became flesh to have a human experience. In his human experience, Jesus worked to redirect his fellow humans into a better way of being through awareness of who and what we are. Whether or not he had a specific moment on a mountaintop in which it all became clear to him, he lived in the awareness of his spiritual nature.

We have to look at this story in two ways; what it meant for Jesus and what it means for us. For Jesus, as the story is told in the Gospels, this moment of glory on the mountain marks the turning of his journey. From here on he is marching toward Jerusalem and his death. It's not as simple as coming down from the mountain and getting back to the work at hand. For Jesus, this experience of God's approval and love empowers him. His self-understanding as a spiritual being is his preparation for facing a most difficult human trial, for a purpose. The

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transfiguration is not a story of either the mountaintop or the road – it is the story of the road understood because of the mountaintop. Nothing could make crucifixion easy to endure but being able to see it as a necessary part of a particular human journey was perhaps the source of Jesus' power and grace. Crucifixion cannot kill a spiritual being; it can only end the human experience.

The other part of the story is played out by Peter, James and John. I do not believe that they were there as mere witnesses. They represent the less enlightened part of human nature. They saw things only through the lens of their lives in Israel, as fishermen on an adventure with an inspiring teacher. They did not see the bigger picture. Even on the mountaintop, they didn't get it. They didn't see it as a greater reality breaking through to teach them something about all of humanity. They only saw it as something that happened to Jesus. Somewhere in their fearful minds may have been lurking a concern that if they got too close, they could get burned. So they ducked for cover and kept their heads down. I wonder though if, rather than cowering in fear, they had gone and stood with Jesus. What would they have learned about themselves? Would they have become part of the Transfiguration?

The Apostle Paul had a similar experience when he was knocked off of his horse while riding to Damascus. A light, so bright that it blinded him for three days, helped him see everything in a new way. He would regain his sight and start planting churches in which he could teach people, that when you have the Christ experience, when you are made new, you no longer regard anything from a human point of view. All of your thinking is done from a spiritual perspective. Paul went on to live his life, enduring regular beatings, arrests, time in Middle Eastern prisons, and some sort of unidentified physical malady with strength and courage because he understood the larger context of his life. He was aware that he was a spiritual being called to a human experience of service.

Now, if these experiences of Jesus and Paul are meant to teach us about ourselves and our relationship with God, does that mean that everyone should expect to have a mountaintop, bright light experience? It would all be easy if that were so. There certainly are people who have such moments and find themselves forever changed. Chances are that you are aware of something different when you are with such people. They don't get worked up about the details, they take a broader view of things, they have a sort of confidence that may not make sense in the moment, as if they know that somehow things will work out, that there is an underlying purpose to everything. There may be a sense of peace about them, more joy, much less worry and anxiety. If you ask them, they can probably tell you of the experience that changed them.

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The challenge for the rest of us, going through life as we always have, is to adopt such an experience as if it were our own – to know that Jesus may have died for our sins but he lived to teach us about our relationship with God and to offer us what he knew and to invite us to live as if we have had such a experience. Take a moment and imagine what it might feel like – perhaps it is like your heart being so filled with love or joy that it feels like it is expanding in your chest. Perhaps it's a bit like the ground is shifting underneath you so you are seeing things from a different angle. Maybe it would be as if you suddenly really loved everyone that you saw. It might also mean that you could feel their pain. People might wonder if there is something wrong with you.

This is why Christianity is not for the faint-hearted. You have to be prepared for and willing to be changed whether it happens on a mountaintop, at your desk, out walking the dog – or maybe even while in church! Let us ponder what such a change might mean as we leave the days of Ordinary Time and enter into the sacred time of Lent. Yes, indeed, let us ponder.

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