

Sermon Last Sunday after Epiphany (Transfiguration Sunday) Year A, 2017

Exodus 24:12-18

2 Peter 1:16-21

Psalm 2

Matthew 17:1-9

Bill Watson

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Stories of that involve mountaintops always bring back memories of hiking in the summer in the White Mountains of NH. Climbing is an exhilarating activity as you scamper up the trail. Frequently, the trail follows streams, rock formations, or presents views along the way. But there is a special feeling when you reach the summit. At the top, the air is thinner, the light is iridescent, views are amazing, and sound takes on new qualities as the blue sky interacts with the silence and the only sound is of the wind arching over the summit. The feeling that this produces is really quite extraordinary. There is a sense of being close to deep mystery. There is a numinous sacred quality to the experience.

I suspect that Peter and his companions had a similar experience on the mountain top which he described in his letter. “We had been eyewitnesses of his majesty. For he received honor and glory from God the Father when that voice was conveyed to him by the Majestic Glory, saying, ‘This is my Son, my Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.’ We ourselves heard this voice come from heaven, while we were with him on the holy mountain.” (2 Peter 1:17).

Peter is describing the event we observe as the Feast of the Transfiguration. This is our celebration as the season of Epiphany draws to a close. The biblical experience that our gospel outlined was an experience through time. Jesus’s appearance was demonstrably changed. But that wasn’t the most important part. Jesus was in conversation with the pre-eminent prophets, Moses and Elijah. They were alive and in conversation. Those who had died were still alive and present to Jesus.

Of course Peter wanted to capture the experience. To build a memorial perhaps to preserve the experience through time. Oh, how we wish we could freeze time. Make it stand still. I have the same desire upon reaching the summit.

I want to hold the image in my mind for eternity. I have taken dozens of pictures but they never convey the majesty. They fail to transmit the luminous quality of the experience. Like Peter, I want to capture the experience, preserve it somehow. But even with cameras with lots of megapixels of resolution, pictures never capture the experience.

Coming down off the mountain is always tough. How was your hike, I'm asked? Amazing, stunning. Yet, you know that words fail to capture the essence of the experience. You just guess that people are imaging postcard pictures in their minds. But they weren't there and you cannot express it all because it was an experience, a gestalt that cannot be conveyed with words alone. It was a transformative experience that revealed something of the divine and moved us deeply.

Perhaps that is why Jesus wouldn't allow the disciples to tell anyone. Because in hearing they wouldn't be able to appreciate what had really taken place. The power of these experiences is not in what can be described but rather in the impact they have on us. We are changed, transfigured, transformed, converted.

These experiences where we feel close to the divine, the numinous, the deeply mysterious are sometimes spoken of as thin places. In Celtic mythology the notion of these thin places are felt to be where the visible and the invisible world come into their closest proximity. These are places that provide the clearest communication between the temporal and the eternal.

Transfiguration happened a long time ago and it is a part of an ancient story. We weren't present and we can't touch the mountain but we can have these experiences ourselves and we do. Where are they for you?

Sometimes these experiences transform our understanding of who we are. Yes, we are frail creatures of flesh, torn by the same torments and demons. But also accompanied, suffused by the holy, the sacred, the divine. Sometimes these transformations aren't a source of joy at all. Sometimes sickness transfigures us, tragedy transfigures us, stress and sadness transfigure us. These transfigurations affect not only us but those we love as well. They may not feel like they have any promise at all. They may be filled with despair and hurt.

But the divine mystery completely pervades the world around us and our lives as well. And even through the dark times we may come to know just how close the divine love is to us. That it accompanies us each and every day. The divine light shines from our lives. Not limited to a few/ occasionally or the grand. But every day.

The experience, the journey of life transfigures us, changes us. And we aren't the same. That diagnosis, that experience, that marriage, that divorce, that surgery, that vacation, that accident, that injury, that child, that love. All change us in myriad ways. Through all of them, the divine presence of the Holy Spirit is with us, at times suffering with us and at other times overjoyed along with us. These are the experiences that transfigure us, transform us. And we are forever changed.

The divine love occasionally radiates from us and has the power to transform the spaces around us and make them a little thinner. We can carry it inside and it can make a difference every moment in how we are present to one another, care for one another, pray for one another.

This past week, I was away at a Credo planning conference in the quaint town of Safety Harbor, Fl. Several of the faculty and I have a custom of walking every morning at 6 am. Our walks this week ended at the local Starbucks where we stopped for coffee. For the first time, Starbucks was a thin place. Connection occurred in a place that is usually not known for connection. We went in the cool damp morning air after our walk. On Wednesday morning, my friend Percy and I ordered two large coffees and were on our way. But the next morning something amazing happened. The same barista, Patti on her name tag, recognized us. "Now I know you will want two large coffees, which variety will it be today? Then she said, "If you are coming back in the morning (which would be our last morning) you could use this coupon and get a free breakfast sandwich." Whereupon she pulled out a small card and put two stickers on it for today's coffees and then two stickers for yesterday's as well. "Come back tomorrow for the fifth sticker and get a free breakfast sandwich," she said.

And of course we went back the next and last morning. Again, she remembered us and asked if we had brought our card? We had. But as she added the fifth sticker to the card, she asked which sandwich we wanted to try. My walking partner, Percy said. "We are down the street at the conference center and

we get a full breakfast every morning. We don't really want the sandwich. But I bet you know someone who could use one?" Patti, thought for a moment and said, "how wonderful, yes I know just the person who is homeless." "I'll give it to them." For the first time, Starbucks was a thin place. I could feel the connection between us and the divine love of God. The divine was mediated by the barista, Patti, an older woman who said that she had worked there for 12 years.

The Rev. Mark Roberts has written (The Rev. Dr. Mark Roberts, 2012, *Patheos* from Synthesis 2/26/2017) that the "purpose of thin places is to help us realize that all places can be thin. Or, better yet, perhaps the purpose of a thin place is to train us to make the other places in our lives thinner. Moreover, when we realize that the Spirit of God dwells within us, we will come to believe that we are called to be thin places, as God makes his presence known through us." That is a pretty tall order. But it speaks to the power that each of us has to reveal the divine love to one another.

If we are fortunate, the experiences of transfiguration change us and in turn influence all whom we encounter. That has a tremendous impact on us and the world around us. You see the world is in a pretty bad way. Politically, environmentally, economically and most recently in South Sudan as violence has interfered with planting and now famine is beginning. There is much to fear and yet in the midst of all of life there is the presence of the divine love and life that accompanies us. It doesn't make everything all right. Not all endings are happy. But the divine love that accompanies us gives us strength to make it through the day and sometimes allows us to radiate God's love to those whom we encounter. And that is transfiguration.