

F2F Moments of Mystery – A Sermon on Matthew 17:1-9

One of my favorite pictures is of my aging mother and me. She is about 101 years old and nearly blind. She is sitting in the front row of the transept at Concordia Seminary's Chapel of St. Timothy and St. Titus during the ceremony of my Vicarage Placement. It is just following the announcement of my receiving my first assignment in ministry – to a congregation we had been at 50 years earlier – and to which I would later serve as sole pastor. We are face to face, nose to nose, eye to eye. In that moment we see no one but each other. There is nothing else. That moment encapsulates **everything**. It is, however, more than just a mother and son. The old adage, what you see is what you get, is not applicable. We are a part of something much bigger than ourselves. There is more going on than what physical eyes can see or understand. We enter a mystery that can neither be defined nor discussed, only experienced.

There are moments like that in every life. Lovers gazing at each other see more than just another person. They have been brought face to face with the mystery of love. Think about the day you beheld for the very first time your child -- or grandchild. You were seeing **more** than just a baby. You were face to face with the mystery of life. Look at a little child who squeals and quivers with excitement. We hear that often at Open Arms... It is **more** than just excitement. That child has come face to face with the mystery of **deep joy**. Or recall for a moment a time you made a confession, formal or informal, and experienced the forgiveness of God or another person. It was about much more than words, past behavior, and the memory of estrangement. You came face to face with the mystery of grace amidst brokenness. I recall being in a hospice room with Don Long as the family had gathered -- we waited and watched for him to be raised up and carried into new life. We spent that afternoon face to face with the mystery of death.

These are the moments of transfiguration. Each one of them is distinct, unique, and unrepeatable. Yet they are somehow the same. Each one is so transparent, so real, they shine with the light of God's presence. They are moments of pure grace. We cannot make them happen. We can only be there when it does happen. In that moment everything around us seems to fall away. There are no distractions. It is a moment of complete presence, attention, and union. It is a moment when we come face to face with another person, with ourselves, and ultimately with God. In that moment we could truthfully say, "I have eyes for you only."

There is nothing else to be seen. That moment holds the entire world and all of life. Nothing else matters, not because it is excluded or unimportant, but because everything belongs. Everything is included in that moment. Nothing has been lost or left out. It is a moment of union with God, another person, and our self. We experience the union of heaven and earth, divinity and humanity, spirit and matter, time and eternity. We experience Christ!

That is what happened to Peter, James, and John on the mountain in today's gospel. "*And when they lifted up their eyes, they saw no one but Jesus only.*" They did not see Moses or Elijah, each other, the cloud, or the mountain. Everything and everyone was present, **contained**, in Jesus only. This was as much **their** transfiguration as it was Jesus'. They did not just see the light, they became the light; humanity illumined with and by divinity.

Jesus did not become something he was not before that night on the mountain. He was always filled with the glory of God, radiating the divine light. Jesus did not change and become something new -- but the disciples did. Their sight was healed, their vision corrected, and their blindness removed. They saw the world transfigured, capable of revealing the beauty of God's holiness. They experienced all of life and creation as sacramental. They saw and experienced life and the world as God sees and intends it. They experienced Christ!

Every time we experience a transfiguring event, our vision is healed and we see in a new and different way. We see with God's eyes. Transfiguration is not so much about what we see but how we see. It's the difference between seeing with physical eyes and seeing with transfigured eyes. As long as we see only with physical eyes, we will always be looking for love, bored with life, bereft of joy, bound by guilt, and in fear of death.

? **Will** we continue to live as if what we see is all we get -- or will we let our seeing bring us face to face with the Mystery? Transfigured eyes do not deny or ignore the circumstances of our life or world. They show us, rather, that in the midst of and sometimes despite those circumstances there is nothing but God, there is only God; there is nothing but life, there is only life; there is nothing but love, there is only love; and there is nothing but light, there is only light. There is nothing but Christ, there is only Christ.

Transfigured eyes see with Faith. This deeper seeing, this transfigured vision, is what allows us to face, endure, and respond to the circumstances of our life and world. It is why **we** – with Peter, James and John - can “*Rise, and have no fear*” (v. 7). It is the source of our thanksgivings. This transfigured vision sustained the disciples through Jesus’ crucifixion and to his resurrection.

And because of Christ’s sacrifice for us, God sees US with transfigured vision – through the lens of the cross. God sees us as forgiven – justified – declared NOT guilty. He considers us to be His children because of the person and work of His only begotten Son, Jesus the Christ. He calls you His own.

Perhaps that is why the Church asks us to hear the transfiguration story every year on the Last Sunday after the Epiphany. It is the beginning of our Lenten preparation. It functions as the hinge between the Season of Epiphany and the Season of Lent. Throughout the Season of Epiphany God has turned **His** face towards humanity. Lent is the season when we learn anew to turn **our** face toward God, that we might look up and see Jesus only everywhere we look – with the eyes of Faith – and experience moments of mystery – Face to Face!

And it is why we continue to ask – every day, “How can we help others see with transfigured eyes?” or, in other words, we continue to ask ourselves, “How can I help others Experience Christ?”

In Jesus’ Name. AMEN.