

“The One Good Thing”

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Transfiguration



The Transfiguration
James Tissot

Readings

Mark 9:2-4, 7 from *the Message* by Eugene Peterson

Jesus took Peter, James, and John and led them up a high mountain. His appearance changed from the inside out, right before their eyes. His clothes shimmered, glistening white, whiter than any bleach could make them. Elijah, along with Moses, came into view, in deep conversation with Jesus.

Just then a light-radiant cloud enveloped them, and from deep in the cloud, a voice: “This is my Son, marked by my love. Listen to him.”

From *Life Coming to a Focus*, a homily by Richard Rohr
published by The Center for Action and Contemplation

The disciples first respond to the Transfigured Christ with fear. In our global time of crisis, this is where many of us are today. The disciples mirror the itinerary of the spiritual journey: we start out with many concerns, fears, and worries. Our minds and hearts are all over the place. But Jesus comes, touches them, and says, “Get up and do not be afraid.” When the three disciples raise their eyes, they see nothing but one image: Jesus. Their lives have become fully focused and simplified on the one thing that is good, the one thing they desire, and the one thing that is necessary. What a moment of grace and encouragement!

As time marches relentlessly forward, we find ourselves at the threshold of the season of lengthening, or “lent,” which begins in just a few short days. What is lengthening is the light, and actually it’s been doing so from the time of the winter solstice, but what happens now is that we become aware of it. We don’t see it ... until we notice it. So Lent becomes our season of noticing, moving us along a hopeful journey that takes us through the vernal equinox and ultimately to the glorious day of longest light. With the ever-increasing day there is so much more to see, with ever-expanding windows that bring light into body, mind, and spirit. It is a time of deepened understanding, intuition, and wisdom.

It is part of our tradition that on the final Sunday of Epiphany we consider one of the more esoteric, ethereal episodes in gospel literature. It is a strange and beautiful story, with a bewilderingly limited description of a scene that seems to have altered the consciousness of those in the true inner circle, namely, Peter, James, and John. As the story goes, Jesus hiked with them up into a high hill, and once they got to the top, his appearance was somehow altered. They saw bright light coming from him, and within that light a sort of “audio-visual” of Jesus, Moses, and Elijah having a conversation.

If only we could hear what they were saying! The only clue is from the Luke tradition which says that they were discussing how Jesus would soon depart, which might have interested the three disciples if they hadn't been too frightened to even think about it. All Peter could blurt out was a cool idea about building three shrines right then and there, one for Moses, one for Elijah, and one for Jesus. And while he was blathering on about staying up there forever, they were surrounded in a fog and a voice came from nowhere, saying “This is my beloved offspring. Listen to him!” With that, everything returned to normal, including Jesus's appearance, and they started back down the hill with their myriad questions. In his answers, Jesus emphasized that they were to keep the whole episode secret until after his death, and it seems as though they did.

Have you ever had an experience that you simply could not put into words? Have you tried explaining something that is clear in your own mind, but met by others with looks of perplexity? Reading through the sayings attributed to Jesus, there are few certainties but this one: When Jesus sought to be understood, he spoke simply and directly with little doubt about what he meant. At other times, he spoke in parable, simile, and metaphor, which often did less to illustrate his meaning and more to obscure it. Two thousand years later, all this can mean to us is that some questions are meant to be inhabited rather than answered.

The congregational covenant we have made with each other over many decades commits us to living *in* the questions and enjoying the sacred space of our metaphors without getting all worked up about building shrines and creating dogma. It is a feature of being human that prompts us to nail it all down, and to “man-splain” it to anyone who will listen. The truth is: no one is listening. So if we're not here to enlighten the world with our dogmatic theological pronouncements, what is there left for us to do? I'd say the answer to that is pretty much *everything*.

For some people, the Bible remains a massive card catalogue of definitive answers to all of life's questions. For others it is a doorway into the unanswerable questions, and can pull us again and again into the “great cloud of unknowing” as described by an anonymous Christian mystic of the 14th century who said it this way:

Whatever you do, this darkness and the cloud are between you and your God, and hold you back from seeing him clearly by the light of understanding in your reason, and from experiencing him in the sweetness of love in your feelings. And so prepare to remain in this darkness as long as you can, always begging for him you love; for if you are ever to feel or see him ... it must always be in this cloud and this darkness.

Our modern western minds are uncomfortable with such thinking, locking us often into a pervasive fundamentalism that labels us as failures if we cannot categorize every piece of our spiritual experiences. You can dissect an apple and place a piece of it under a microscope, or you can grow an orchard with many varieties of apple and place them in bins according to their characteristics. But none of it matters unless you just simply eat the apple, make it part of yourself and allow yourself to be nourished by it.

Jesus showed his friends something that they could never dissect nor comprehend. The experience nourished them in indescribable ways. It wasn't something they could teach. It was something they could only be. I can imagine them after the crucifixion saying in their exasperation, "I guess you had to be there." In a homily delivered eleven months ago, our friend Richard Rohr put it this way:

When the three disciples raise their eyes, they see nothing but one image: Jesus. Their lives have become fully focused and simplified on the one thing that is good, the one thing they desire, and the one thing that is necessary. What a moment of grace and encouragement!

Father Richard says that "our minds are all over the place." I say "amen" to that! Our media and electronic devices like to keep us in that state as much as possible. They'd like us to listen to the latest thing—it's always "breaking news," as if it cannot wait for tomorrow's newspaper. It keeps us in a state of confusion, agitation and fear, at the mercy of a hundred things at a time.

The beauty of the transfiguration story is how transfixed the disciples were after their experience of the cloud. Their focus was on the one good thing, the one thing they desired, the one that was singularly important. Once they got there, everything else fell into a less important category. I certainly cannot say with any definition or clarity why this episode is included in the gospel stories. It feels irrelevant to ponder how it might fit into some sort of systematic theology, or the idea of a Jesus who is God in ways that we are not. Let's just receive it as the gift that it is. Let us relinquish the need for information and just feast upon its grace. Let the grace of unknowing be our prayer.

