

Transfiguration (A)
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Everyday Mountaintop Moments
by Jim McCrea

Matthew 17:1-9

Moses Mendelssohn was a famous Jewish scholar, who eventually became the grandfather of composer Felix Mendelssohn. When Moses was a young man, his father arranged a marriage for him. His father chose Fromet Guggenheim to be his son's bride. Fromet was a young, rich and beautiful woman. On the other hand, although Moses Mendelssohn was warm, compassionate and brilliant, he wasn't very attractive, being short, ugly and with a hunched back.

As was often the case in the Jewish community in those days, the young couple had never met before their match was arranged, so a party was held to honor them and to give them a chance to meet one another.

Unfortunately, the instant Fromet laid eyes on Moses, she was immediately repulsed and she informed her father in no uncertain terms that the engagement was absolutely off. When Moses was told that she didn't want to marry him, he asked for a chance to speak with her privately.

So the two of them went off to a corner. They made small talk for a minute or two and then Moses said, "I want to tell you a story. As you know, all marriages are arranged in heaven. Before I was born, an angel was escorting me to earth. I asked if it was possible for me to see the woman God had selected for me. The angel answered that though it was highly unusual, he didn't think it was impossible.

"I was granted one look, and to my astonishment the woman had an ugly hump on her back. I pleaded with God, 'It is not fair that a woman be a hunchback. She will be the object of scorn and contempt. I beg you, give me the hump and let her be well formed and beautiful.' Then he was quiet for a moment before he concluded. 'God heard my prayer, and granted my wish. I am that boy and you are that girl.'"

Now, whatever you may think of the theology behind that story, the fact is that it worked. As Fromet listened to Moses, she began to see him with different eyes. She began to look beyond his unappealing physical appearance to see the kind of man he was inside and, because of that shift in perspective, she ended up marrying him.

The ability to see beyond the surface is really the point of our Gospel lesson. Six days before the Transfiguration, Jesus had taken his disciples to Caesarea Philippi, a concentrated area in northern Israel where a wide variety of religions were followed. There Jesus asked the disciples who they thought he was.

Peter famously replied, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.” But when Jesus followed up Peter’s faith statement by explaining that as the Messiah, he would have to go to Jerusalem, be killed and then return to life, Peter made a strenuous attempt to talk Jesus out of that. That, in turn, led Jesus to say, “Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.”

Those words had to sting and hang heavy in the air — an unspoken tension lying like a thick fog over the next several days. Then, six days later, with Jesus’ words about sacrifice and dying are still ringing in their ears, Jesus leads Peter, James and John up the mountain. They are depressed, confused and frightened.

Now some of you have heard my theory that these three aren’t really the blessed inner group of disciples as most people believe. Instead, I think Jesus spends more time with them than with the others because they are the slow group. They’re the ones who struggle the most to make sense of Jesus’ teachings, so Jesus focuses his attention on them to try to get them up to speed with the rest.

That may sound bad, but let me tell you a story about a high school math class I was in. The concepts in that class were very easy for me, so I would regularly complete my assignment in a very short time. Then, the teacher asked me to tutor some of the other kids.

I remember one student in particular. He tried and tried to understand, but it was incredibly difficult for him. So I had to attempt one approach after another to get through to him and eventually he did get it. Many years later, I heard that he became a dentist. My initial reaction to that news was to remember his struggles and think I’d never want to be his patient. But I was looking at that from the wrong perspective. What I should have remembered was his dogged determination to grasp the concepts until he finally managed it. €

That’s what I see in Peter, James and John. Things weren’t working out the way they’d expected and they weren’t quite sure what to make of it. That’s when Jesus brought them along to share the literal mountaintop experience that is the subject of today’s gospel lesson.

There Peter, James and John saw what they needed to see on the Mount of Transfiguration. They wanted to make some kind of sense out of what Jesus had told them about his coming death, even though it ran counter to everything they’d ever heard about the Messiah.

Then they suddenly saw Jesus talking with Moses and Elijah — the personifications of the Law and the Prophets. The fact that Jesus was talking with them about the crucifixion was a way of saying that — as senseless as his death might have seemed — it was the culmination of all that had gone on before in God’s relationship with the people of Israel.

Then the disciples heard the voice of God himself saying, “This is my Son, whom I love [...]. Listen to him!” You can’t get a greater commendation than that. So what was it that they were supposed to listen to? As soon as God had finished speaking, Jesus came up to the disciples and touched them, using the same gesture he typically used when he was healing someone.

And the first thing he said to them — the thing that God himself had told them to listen to — was “Get up and don’t be afraid.” By the way, the word that’s translated “get up” is the same word that Matthew always used to refer to the resurrection of the dead. In others words, Jesus is giving the disciples a new life beyond their fears. And ironically, it isn’t the “glowing,” glorified Jesus who does this, but the down-to-earth, human Jesus who comes to the disciples and touches them and speaks to them.

So this story isn’t just about a change in Jesus’ outward appearance. It’s a story in which those three disciples were allowed to see the reality of Jesus’ character beyond his physical appearance. In a sense, they were the ones who were transfigured because they were momentarily given the grace to see who Jesus for who he really was. And then Jesus reached out to heal them of their fears.

Frederick Buechner tells a story in which people are shown a bird cage filled with food, water, a perch and so on — everything it needed except for a bird. However, the cage had a hidden tape recorder that played chirping noises. Later, the people who were shown the cage were asked to describe what they had seen. Invariably, they would describe the non-existent bird in great detail.

The story of the Transfiguration is the exact opposite of that. The disciples were suddenly — if only temporarily — able to see beyond the reality of everyday life to glimpse the hidden truth about Jesus. And yet, they still didn’t quite get it yet. But to be honest, I doubt any of us would have done any better if we were in their sandals.

In connection with that, a friend of mine told about an elderly member of his congregation who asked him several years ago to read the Transfiguration passage at her funeral. She said, “Tell my friends that this is how I will be; this is really who I am.” When he told me this story, that woman was still alive and living in a nursing home. But by then, both her eyesight and her memory had failed, so she was no longer able to read this passage or even to remember it.

Yet he remembered and whenever he visited her, he said he thought about the Transfiguration story and the promise it contains. So when he looked at what she had become, he thought instead of the glorious person she really is behind the frailty of her body. But what does that mean for the rest of us? It means taking the time to look beyond the obvious to see a deeply loved child of God in every person you come into contact with.

That's relatively easy to say, but highly difficult to put into practice, especially when the person you're dealing with is a pain in the neck. And yet, when you try to do it, you can indeed catch a glimpse behind the veil that covers God's kingdom. That doesn't necessarily require any earthshaking vision, just an ability to see glimpses of God's reality in everyday life.

For example, Guideposts magazine once ran a story that said: "On February 14, I was teaching a class of first graders in a Chicago school. The children were nervous as my supervising teacher called on them to pass out their valentines. Those who received the most tried not to show their excitement. Others who had only a few envelopes huddled low in their chairs.

"When all the cards had been distributed, the teacher left and put me in charge of the class. As the children opened their valentines, I noticed Serena sitting quietly at her desk. Shy and awkward, she came to school sporadically and didn't seem to have any friends among her classmates. I couldn't see her face as she looked down at the few valentines spread out in front of her, but I could see the tears dropping on her desk.

"Crestfallen, I thought how hurt she must be, and I knelt beside her. 'Look!' she said, 'Look at all my valentines! I never thought I would get even one. And look — I got six!'

"[The author adds] Not many of us know how to receive love so deeply that we can do nothing more than cry and shake our heads in silent wonder."

That sense of wonder — that sense of holiness in our midst — is something that is among us almost everywhere, yet we've trained ourselves to ignore it because we see it as being a mere commonplace.

But it wasn't the glorified Christ who healed the disciples, it was the ordinary Jesus of Nazareth. And the disciples weren't invited to the mountaintop to stay there. Instead, they were given that vision to empower them for the difficult times ahead when they returned to back the valley.

At the same time, they were given a charge to be resurrected from their fears and to go about sharing Christ's healing touch with the people they had left behind in the valley.

Viktor Frankl was a survivor of one of the Nazi death camps in World War II. After the war, he wrote a powerful book entitled Man's Search for Meaning about his experiences in a world gone insane. He says:

“We who lived in the concentration camps can remember people who walked through the huts comforting others, giving away their last piece of bread. They may have been few in number, but they offer sufficient proof that everything can be taken from you but one thing. The last of the freedoms — [is] the freedom to choose one’s attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one’s own way.”

As Christians, we are called to choose to see others through the eyes of God. And our reward for following this holy vision is to have a glimpse into heaven on earth. Amen.

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