



ST BARTS

A Sermon by
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The Transfiguration

*Sermon preached at the eleven o'clock service, February 11, 2018
The Last Sunday after the Epiphany—Based on Mark 9:2-9*

A philosopher once observed, “A journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step.” Every kind of journey—emotional journeys, spiritual journeys, even physical journeys—begins the same way. No one reaches college graduation without having first struggled through the application essays. No one comes to their wedding day without having gone out on that first, wobbly date. Spiritual journeys, like every other journey, begin with a single step. To begin a spiritual journey, one is called to make that first, genuine movement. It may be through that brief and most sincere prayer, “God, help me.” As simple as that. It may be a reticent step, a small, hesitant step, but God responds to even a glimmer of interior movement.

When I was doing a clinical counseling residency, I learned a crucial principle in counseling. You cannot successfully counsel anyone unless they want to be counseled. I know this sounds obvious, but it has actually been an important lesson for me. I mean, how many of us have tried to offer counseling to our children or our grandchildren who didn’t, as Jesus said, “have ears to hear”? We’ve tried to help co-workers, neighbors, friends, loved ones who weren’t ready for our assistance.

And how many of us have been unable to hear helpful counsel ourselves because we just weren’t in the space where we could receive it? Sometimes we’re just not there. The willingness to be transformed by God, the willingness to take a spiritual journey and to be open enough to allow God to get past our carefully defended boundaries is, in itself, a great, big, monstrous gift. That willingness is an extraordinary opportunity bestowed by God upon anyone who’s willing to dare the first step.

Today’s Gospel lesson faithfully records the details of a spiritual journey made by Jesus and his closest companions. It’s recounted by the authors of the synoptic gospels: Matthew, Mark, and Luke, who all share an original source. It is Mark’s version we’re

focused on this morning. This is a journey which began six days after a faithful Peter answered an exceedingly direct question put to him by Jesus: "Who do you say that I am?" Remember, Jesus didn't ask, "What do others say about me?" Or, "What do you think of me?" But, "Who do you say that I am?" And, out of all the different ways that question could have been answered, Peter takes a giant first step, a leap of faith really, when he replies, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." Wow. Something from all the time Peter spent around Christ allowed him to see into the very center of the miracle and experience a divine transfiguration himself.

Six days after this revelation, a freshly-understood Jesus took Peter, James, and John and "led them up a high mountain apart." James and John were two fishermen brothers who had, by then, come a long way from their life on the Sea of Galilee. Peter, their leader, was also a fisherman, and he joined them on this important trek with Jesus. Now according to tradition, Jesus and these three disciples climbed Mount Tabor, an imposing stone-strewn mountain you can see from almost every part of the lower Galilee. When I studied at Saint George's College in Jerusalem, I hiked a portion of the trail to the top of Mt. Tabor. It's a deceptively long climb to the summit, and it's the kind of journey that invites constant reappraisal, as the wind tugs at your clothing and the thought of stopping and turning around never completely leaves your mind.

Once they had all reached the top of the mountain, Jesus and the disciples experienced an incredible moment. At the summit of the mountain, Jesus was transfigured before Peter, James, and John. The author of the Gospel of Mark says, "He was transfigured before them, and his clothes became dazzling white, such as no one on earth could bleach them." And there was more. Moses, the great giver of the law, and Elijah, the greatest of the prophets, became present there and conversed with Jesus. And, if all this weren't incredible enough, a bright cloud descended over them and a voice from the cloud said, "This is my son; the beloved; with whom I am well pleased. Listen to him."

I think it's fascinating that this is the story the Church wants us to have on the last Sunday before entering the season of Lent, and more importantly, this is the story (and the experience) God wants for Jesus and his closest disciples to have before they take their final journey together and make their striking entrance into Jerusalem. This is the story of a luminous moment, a mountaintop experience, where Jesus and his disciples become clear about who they are and what they are about before beginning the final leg of their journey to the cross.

"This is my beloved Son with whom I am well pleased. Listen to him." This is the endorsement of Jesus. He is the One, the voice of ultimate authority. Moses and Elijah, in the Hebrew tradition, were persons of overwhelming authority; yet Jesus is presented here as a figure of even greater power. "Listen to him." He is the One. The light. The truth. The one who transforms.

Worldly authority often involves the exercise of power and the veiled threat of punishment. Political power, financial power, military power, even parental power is something we know well. You've seen those t-shirts that say, "Because I'm the Mommy, that's why!" It's a slogan most parents can identify with. Employees have occasionally been told, "If you don't do this, I'll get someone who can!" Or the infamous, "You'll never work in this town again." Worldly authority can be twisted or misused.

How different is the authority of Jesus, who has no wealth in the sense of the world's wealth, and no power in the sense of the world's power. The authority of Jesus is derived completely from his relationship with God. "This is my beloved Son. Listen to him!" And this is true of our own authority as well. Our authority as human beings is derived from our relationship with God, if only we were more aware of this truth. If only we could allow that power to break into our carefully guarded spaces and secrets and issues. I mean, truly. What would it mean in your life (or in mine) to "listen to him"? What changes would be required? What transformations? What would it be like if an entire Christian community "listened, truly listened" to him?

I always think it's helpful to note that in Greek the word for transfiguration is *meta-morpha-thé*, the root word for the English word metamorphosis. What would it be like to undergo a spiritual metamorphosis, a rebirth, a transformation of the soul? Frightening? Exciting? Jesus was changed on the Mount of Transfiguration, and so, too, were his disciples. You cannot stand in the very presence of the living God without being changed.

Being a witness to the transformational moments of others ends up transforming us as well. I have watched the lights go on as people have seriously studied the Bible. I have seen youth groups that formed out of a love for pepperoni pizza spiritually come alive and become a loving, prayerful community of faith. I have seen congregations that began as an unconnected group of strangers become a cohesive, loving family of faith. I have seen churches catch a vision of what they could be, and they have become transfigured by the power of the Spirit. I have been transformed by that dazzling brightness, and I have seen others be transformed, too. And like them, I am different than I once was—not anywhere

close to perfect, but different. And I'm still trying to understand this incomprehensible gift of faith I've been given.

It's a funny thing, really. We always say we want change but we also fear change, just as we want and fear new life, just as we want and fear an experience of the living God. If you could have personally asked those disciples whether they wanted to go up that mountain to see what they saw and hear what they heard, chances are they would have said, "Oh, yes!" We often say "yes" to change theoretically and then realize we're stranded out there in the "uncomfortable zone."

Are any of you watching the Winter Olympics? I love skiing theoretically: the freedom, the snow, shushing back and forth through the pines down a mountain of white powder. But the reality of skiing is quite a different thing for me. Of course, there are so many things more frightening than trying to ski down a steep slope. Like making a commitment to one person for the rest of your life, or leaving a job which is robbing you of your selfhood, or telling someone the absolute truth. Or honestly examining your life and reviewing your relationship with your Creator.

Standing there, dazzled by the view on the mountaintop, we do not know what to do next. And then, what joy and precious grace! Because a more familiar voice says, "Rise and have no fear." That's when we look up and see only Jesus and understand everything is possible for him who lived and died and rose again for us. What we have to do is listen to him, really listen to him as he speaks through the ordinary events of our lives, transforming them into occasions of bright presence and joy. All my growth has come from going out to the edge, of going beyond my comfort zones and into the realm of the new, the unexplored. Joseph Campbell wrote, "The cave you fear holds the treasure you seek." So true.

There's an old story related to Leonardo da Vinci's painting of "The Last Supper." One of the world's most famous paintings is not found in a museum. The painting was completed in the refectory of the Convent of Santa Maria della Grazie in Milan. Da Vinci began work on the mural in 1495 and completed it 3 years later. The mural depicts the last supper of Jesus with his apostles as described in the Gospel of John before he was crucified.

After completing the painting, which required months of dedicated work, da Vinci showed the finished work to a colleague and asked him what he thought of the piece. The artist gushed. He told da Vinci he had never seen such attention to detail, such careful shading

and coloring, such marvelous perspective and life-like gesturing of the figures. And, as he spoke, he noticed da Vinci looked crestfallen. He asked the great master what was wrong. “Have I said something to offend?” It’s said that Leonardo wearily shook his head and said quietly, “The face. The face. I want you to see the face of Jesus.” Then the artist realized that every brush stroke, every line and color and shading in that magnificent work was designed to point to that central feature: the face of Christ.

That single, solitary face. It is that face which speaks to us with power and authority. It is that face which illuminates a darkened world so chock full of terror and mayhem. It is that face which transfigures our broken hearts and our fractured lives with a light brighter than a hundred midday suns: a light to heal and redeem and transform. That face. That face.

And if we sought after that face on the Lenten road to Jerusalem—if, even for the briefest of moments, we might risk and dare take one small step towards God—then when Easter dawns bright and fresh and pure, we would be there with him. We would be transformed, transfigured. We would be like Jesus.

Amen.