

I think I understand Peter's awe at the top of the mountain. When Jennifer and I were first married, her parents owned about 100 acres of land in the North Cascades, just about three miles up the West Chewuch river outside Winthrop. There was an old farm house, a small apple orchard and a corral with just enough fence around it to keep a couple of horses happy. We got up there as often as we could and loved to ride up to the farthest corner of the property where there was a huge Ponderosa where we could tie up the horses and just sit and gaze out across the Methow Valley.

Sitting up there with the smell of dry sage and pine, listening to the meadowlarks singing and the horses grazing with a view of the mountains as far as the eye could see, you could feel the hand of God in creation all around you. There is a reason that people from all traditions have experiences of the Divine on mountaintops. There is a reason that the Celts often found thin spots on mountains where the veil that separates heaven and earth is lifted and, if you are awake to it, you can perceive and experience more directly the presence of God—the shekinah that made Moses' face glow. Baptist pastor and poet, Rev. Sharlande Sledge has described these "thin places" as spaces "both seen and unseen, where the door between this world and the next is cracked open for a moment, and the light is not all on the other side<sup>1</sup>."

There are, of course, other kinds of thin spaces where people have felt like they encountered something holy and transcendent. Brief moments or even more enduring experiences of the presence of God can happen in literal mountaintop events, but also in symphonies, art galleries, in time spent with loved ones and, it is dearly to be hoped, in worship and prayer. What these thin space experiences have in common is a sense of one's own transcendent and immanent nature in relationship to Almighty God, the Creator, who is closer to each one of us than our own breath.

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<sup>1</sup> Sharlande Sledge, "Thin Places," non-published, quoted by Sylvia Maddox in "Where Can I Touch the Edge of Heaven?"

If you have ever been to such a thin place where the veil between this earthly realm and the kingdom of heaven seemed to fall away, then you probably also recognize the very human impulse to want to preserve the experience—to capture it and hold on to it. And just so, Peter suggests to Jesus that because it is good to be here—and he is not wrong—they should make three dwellings: one for Jesus, one for Elijah and one for Moses.

God's response is to draw Peter, James and John further into the mystery—so far into the thin space that they finally see Jesus as he truly is. And then they are speechless. Perhaps they remain silent because they have just been invited into an intensely thin space between Jesus and God, so intimate and mysterious that the pivotal moment happens inside a cloud. Perhaps they were terrified by the experience. Perhaps they simply treasured the experience to the point that they wanted to keep it for themselves; to preserve it.

We have since, of course, built an absolutely breathtaking church on the site where tradition says this event took place. There is a sanctuary dedicated to Christ with a mosaic portraying this event on the ceiling of the apse. The Franciscans who run the place put a glass plate on the floor on the feast of Transfiguration in August so that the sun will reflect up onto the gold mosaic that you see in black and white on the front of your bulletin. There are also two chapels; one devoted to Elijah and one to Moses, where almost three weeks ago now, I was privileged to attend a Mass.

In his sermon that day, Bishop Barry reminded us that it was not Jesus who changed. What actually changed was the *perception* of Jesus in the eyes of Peter, James and John. Now, the word “transfiguration” doesn't appear in the passage, but it means “a marked change in appearance or form,” which includes the idea of metamorphosis, that is to say, a complete change of form such as when a caterpillar changes into a butterfly. And so if the incarnation at Christmas changed our perception of God and the form of our relationship to God when the Divine manifested as human, then the transfiguration challenges our perceptions of God and the form of our relationship to God in the other direction. This man, Jesus, whose history we cherish, whose words and earthly ministry we treasure—this

human, who had emotions, who suffered, who breathed and died with a body of flesh and blood just like we do—this fully human Jesus is also fully divine. Just as Christmas draws us closer to humanity because God in Christ is human, the Transfiguration draws into the light of the Divine because in Christ, a human is God.

Now, the lectionary actually allows us stop with the mountaintop experience that left Peter, James and John silent. And I understand the temptation to leave well enough alone, but I think that's a mistake. I think that without the story that follows, we too easily leave the disciples' transfigured perception of Christ on the top of the mountain. And that creates a problem.

There is an old Zen proverb that says, "After enlightenment, the laundry." It reminds us that we cannot hold on to our experiences in the thin spaces, no matter how beautiful. To do so would be like imagining that we could just inhale and never exhale. Spiritual insights are not the goal, but simply the beginning or another step along the road, and the gift is only secondarily for you. The gift of spiritual insight is activated by giving it to or on behalf of others. The only way to integrate these insights is by getting back down the mountain and into the messy business of life, to engage with life sometimes for years afterward.

For most of us, powerful spiritual experiences lead to on-going struggles to embody what we have seen. We run the risk of clinging to the experience or our interpretation of it. We can become attached to our perceptions of our teachers, our path or our self. Jesus breaks that very cycle by acting in the way that his disciples cannot yet. He walks toward the pain and the darkness of a human family on the verge of disaster and becomes the wholeness that they require to survive.

The story of the transfiguration loses its power without the moment when Jesus and the disciples come down from the mountain. The transfiguration is not a Divine wardrobe change but a demonstration that the God who is at work transfiguring creation among us, beside us and within us is not content to remain simply a one-time experience on far-removed summit. God not only changes our

perception of Christ, but our perception of ourselves and the people we encounter once we are down from the mountaintop.

The prolific writer and Trappist monk, Thomas Merton, had a famous epiphany on a street corner in Louisville, Kentucky, that changed the course of his life. After years of feeling separate from other people, he had a clarifying moment of grace that set the agenda for the rest of his life. From his mountaintop experience on a downtown street corner, Merton was inspired to write on behalf of peace and justice, on civil rights and religious freedom, and left a legacy of spiritual insights for generations to follow.

Let me share his description of that incident. "In Louisville," Merton writes, "at the corner of Fourth and Walnut, in the center of the shopping district, I was suddenly overwhelmed with the realization that I loved all these people, that they were mine and I theirs, that we could not be alien to one another even though we were total strangers. It was like waking from a dream of separateness, of spurious self-isolation in a special world..."

"This sense of liberation from an illusory difference was such a relief and such a joy to me that I almost laughed out loud...I have the immense joy of being man, a member of a race in which God Himself became incarnate. As if the sorrows and stupidities of the human condition could overwhelm me, now that I realize what we all are. And if only everybody could realize this! But it cannot be explained. There is no way of telling people that they are all walking around shining like the sun.

"Then it was as if I suddenly saw the secret beauty of their hearts, the depths of their hearts where neither sin nor desire nor self-knowledge can reach, the core of their reality, the person that each one is in God's eyes. If only they could all see themselves as they really are. If only we could see each other that way all the time. There would be no more war, no more hatred, no more cruelty, no more greed...But this cannot be seen, only believed and 'understood' by a peculiar gift."

You see, what Merton understood is that God does not give us mountaintop spiritual experiences so that we will stop at the creation of holy

shrines. Instead, God intends these experiences to change our hearts, so that we can join Christ in transfiguring the world.