

“Inside Talk”

2 Corinthians 3: 12 – 4:2, Luke 9: 28-36

Transfiguration Sunday/C, February 14, 2010

Lynne M. Dolan

I preached a sermon on Easter Sunday several years ago where I talked about practicing the resurrection. I don't think anyone thought resurrection was something you could practice. Today, in much the same way, I believe Jesus invites us to practice transfiguration. That seems a little more reasonable since transfiguration means to be changed or transformed. Perhaps from what we hear in today's lesson it might even mean to be changed from the inside out. Both resurrection and transfiguration are events we likely associate only with Jesus. He is the one who was resurrected; he was transfigured. The stories are about him and not the disciples who were with him. We might be witnesses to such events, but we do not fully participate in them. They are mystical, mysterious, not easily defined or understood. They are the result of a profound and life altering encounter with the Holy. Both transfiguration and resurrection are not historical events, but faith encounters, opportunities to experience the in-breaking of God.

The story is told about “a man that took his new hunting dog on a trial hunt one day. After a while he managed to shoot a duck and it fell in the lake. The dog walked over the water, picked up the duck, and brought it to his master. The man was stunned. He didn't know what to think. He shot another duck and again, it fell into the lake and again the dog walked over the water and brought it back to his master. Hardly daring to believe his eyes, and not wanting to be thought a total fool, he told no one about it, but the next day he called his neighbor to come shooting with him. As on the previous day he shot a duck and it fell into the lake. The dog walked over the water and got it. His neighbor didn't say a word. Several more ducks got shot that day and each time the dog walked

over the water to retrieve them and each time the neighbor said nothing and neither did the owner of the dog.

Finally, unable to contain himself any longer the owner asked his neighbor, ‘do you notice anything strange about my dog?’ Yes, replied the neighbor, rubbing his chin and thinking a bit, come to think of it I do, your dog doesn’t know how to swim.”

The story of the transfiguration is one of those stories we have a hard time believing let alone understanding. It is easy to misinterpret what happens whether out of ignorance or fear or lack of openness to the holy. Those disciples who accompany Jesus are in good company. Many people have difficulty understanding what happened. It is outside our frame of reference, it just doesn’t click with us, just as seeing the dog walking on water didn’t click with the neighbor in the story we just heard. The mysterious, unexplained activity of God baffles us and we respond in a way that would lead others to believe we just don’t get it.

Today’s story begins in an ordinary way. Jesus goes up the mountain with a few of his disciples to pray. We don’t know exactly what he prayed about but we can guess that it might have been about the decisions he was about to make and the journey he would soon take to Jerusalem to face his own death. A few days earlier Jesus told the disciples that he would suffer many things, be rejected by the elders and chief priests, and be killed and on the third day be raised to life. You can imagine the disciple’s heads spinning with such a revelation. What on earth was Jesus talking about? Why must he talk of death and what exactly does he mean to return to them after he is already dead?

The disciples go with Jesus but they do not stay with Jesus. They are tired and weary, worried and confused. They don’t ask the right questions. They don’t even know what questions to ask anymore. They go because they love Jesus. They go because they

are honored to be asked. They go because you never quite know what will happen when you are in the presence of Jesus. They can't muster enough strength, however, to stay focused. They drift into that sleepy state before sleep, that dizzying place where you wonder if what you hear or see is real or part of a strange dream.

It is in that strange state of semi-consciousness that Moses and Elijah appear to Jesus. Jesus' face changes and his clothes become dazzling white. Clearly something is happening. They come to their senses and see Jesus carrying on a conversation with two icons of the faith that have been dead for a long time. They talk about Jesus' departure. Just as quickly as the disciples realize what is happening, it is done. Moses and Elijah vanish leaving Jesus and his companions in a fog. Their task is not to analyze what has happened but to be enveloped by its mystery and let it soak into their souls.

We don't know what to do when our rational minds can not explain something we have experienced. Perhaps we will acquire the wisdom or insight we seek if we stop trying to figure everything out. Perhaps that was Peter's motivation when he suggested they erect three dwellings on the sight, a place where the Holy Ones could return and the ordinary folks could have some one on one time with them as Jesus did. Maybe that would help them unravel this mystery. God grows impatient with we who are slow of mind and heart. God grabs our attention by bellowing from within the cloud, "This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!"

The disciples find themselves unable to speak. They leave the mountaintop clad in the mystery of this moment. It would eventually be woven into the fabric of their collective experience, but for now they did not tell others what has happened nor do they try to explain it. Having heard the voice of God, having been in the presence of the Holy, they go with Jesus on to the next town, the next ministry, the next encounter.

Transfiguration might happen in your own back yard. It could happen when you are washing the dishes or walking the dog. It might happen when you are on retreat or on a mission trip. You never know when the Holy Spirit might come to you and you are “strangely warmed” as John Wesley was known to say. Both Jesus and Moses practiced transfiguration. Bruce Epperly says, “they journeyed to holy mountains, ‘thin places,’ of divine transparency, and so can we by creating our own sacred times and spaces in the course of our daily lives. We can, as Barbara Brown Taylor notes, create ‘an altar in the world,’ that awakens us to experiences of the holy.” I believe that is what we long for, transcendent experiences of the Holy One. We have such encounters when we are open to them. Our encounters with God are not private experiences to be accumulated and hoarded, but gifts to the wider community. One can not have such an encounter and not have it change the way you behave, the way you believe, the way you treat God’s creatures and creation.

Barbara Brown Taylor’s most recent book is called, *An Altar in this World: A Geography of Faith*. In it she reflects on the many practices of ordinary life and how they can lead us to a deeper experience of God. She begins with the practice of waking up to God. What a profound difference it makes when we allow God’s mystery to dwell richly within your being and to resist the temptation to explain it away or build a shelter to entrap it. What a difference it makes when we thank God for the momentary glimpse into the holy and not worry if such an encounter will ever come again. What a difference it makes when we trust that God will reveal to us the meaning we seek, in God’s time and for God’s purpose. What a difference it makes when we begin to trust God to be God.

Barbara Brown Taylor says in this chapter on waking up to God, “In biblical terms, it is wisdom we need to live together in this

world. Wisdom is not gained by knowing what is right. Wisdom is gained by practicing what is right, and noticing what happens when that practice succeeds and when it fails. Wise people do not have to be certain what they believe before they act. They are free to act, trusting that the practice itself will teach them what they need to know....Reason can only work with the experience available to it. Wisdom atrophies if it is not walked on a regular basis.”

Peter, John and James were chosen by Jesus to be witnesses. It was Jesus’ hope and prayer that such an encounter would be transformed into wisdom, that having been eye witnesses to his transfiguration they might then practice transfiguration in the world. That is also Jesus’ prayer for us. Wherever and whenever we are privileged to be in the presence of God, it will change our lives forever. It does not mean that from that moment forward we will have all the answers. It does not mean that we will never again fall short of God’s expectations for us. It does not mean that we are immune from the troubles and frustrations of this world. It might mean that when life is tough, we will remember that bright light and the cloud that overshadowed us and trust that God is present there. We will have whatever we need to come down off the mountain and into the world. Perhaps we will do more than simply move through the moment; we will be transfigured by it, a living witness to an ever loving God. May it be so! Amen

Source: Barbara Brown Taylor, *An Altar in the World: A Geography of Faith*, Harper One, 2009.