

“Thin Places and Transfiguration”

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I suspect that most of you know that this is Super Bowl Sunday, when the mighty New England Patriots confront the valiant underdog New York Giants. So I'm guessing that a lot of you would prefer a shorter sermon to a long commentary about the seasons of the Church Year!

But at least let me note that we will have a history-making early Easter this year, March 23rd. That explains why this last Sunday of Epiphany has come so quickly. In just three days we will jump to Ash Wednesday and the beginning of Lent. There will be less time this year, than any other time in our history, to “tell the story of Jesus” from the crib to the cross, from Bethlehem to Golgotha.

So, fasten your spiritual seatbelts and prepare for some dramatic shifts in the seasons of this church year. On the last Sunday of Epiphany we always hear the story of the Transfiguration, because this day is a changeover point in the seasons of the Church. This is a heads-up time to think ahead to what awaits us: Good Friday, Easter, and the Resurrection.

So it's a good time to think with you this morning about transfiguration, transition, and transformation: for Jesus, for his disciples, and for you. In the dramatic account this morning, we have a glimpse of Jesus' full identity as the Messiah, the Savior, and the Son of God. Although, as Luke's gospel describes it, Peter, James and John were "weighed down with sleep," they were jolted awake by Jesus' appearance - an unforgettable "eureka!" experience. Then a transition time begins as Jesus comes down from the mountain with his disciples and turns his face toward Jerusalem.

Everything that happens, from that point forward, will be related to what the disciples remembered from Jesus' transfigured appearance. However, I think it's important to recognize that the full meaning of the transformation is not found as much in the luminous face of Jesus on the mountain that day, as it is in the transformation that happens to us. For it is here at this Transfiguration turning point in our Sunday worship that we are invited not so much to gaze at the searchlight of Jesus' brilliance on the mountain that day, as we are invited to see how that brilliance shines on the critical times in our lives - our turning points.

In the woven fabric of our lives, I think that it is often at our critical, life-altering turning points that we can recognize the bright threads that give our life its deepest meaning. Think about those turning points for you. Some we celebrate and some we mourn, but all of them we remember: the first day on a job after graduating from college; the time you were turned down for a job; when your first child was born, when you leave a home after many years and move to a new home or new community; when each of your parents dies, or, perhaps, when the last child graduates from college and you pay off all your credit card debt. Think for a minute about the turning points in your lives so far. What happened next? Did you just keep on keeping on? Or was there more than that?

What I am suggesting is that the transfiguring that can happen in your own experience is what we need to focus on the most. In fact, a renowned teacher and scholar from Germany, Helmut Thielecke, once said that he suspected that nothing about Jesus himself changed on the mountain that day. What actually changed was the capacity of the disciples to see him as he really was and to discern what that would mean for them.

How can this be? Barbara Brown Taylor, one of the best preachers in the Episcopal Church today, once gave a sermon on the Transfiguration in which she spoke of “thin places.” She had just returned from Ireland, and it seems the Irish have a notion of something they call “thin places.” Thin places are the soft, porous, permeable places where the veil between this world and the next is so sheer that it is easy to see through them and perhaps get a glimpse of the power of Jesus' life penetrating into our lives. I remember the noted biblical

scholar, Marcus Borg, also referring that to Celtic, Irish spirituality as he wrote about "thin places, opening the heart."

I think we often read the Transfiguration account in the Gospel today and see it as something that happened to Jesus. We read about the great cloud and the shining light and Jesus revealed in glory. They were so overcome, that Peter wanted to freeze the vision in front of them of Jesus talking with Moses and Elijah and build a monument to the occasion, a dwelling place to come back to.

However, creating a monument and freezing that moment in time was certainly not the purpose of that event. Matthew, Mark, and Luke all go on from this Transfiguration event to record that the disciples went with Jesus directly into ministry with the crowds, and then moved inexorably toward Jerusalem. The shining, transfiguring light was not so much focused now on the figure of Jesus, but on the road ahead for all of them.

So I am suggesting that the disciples with Jesus on the mountain had encountered a thin place between this world and the future that Jesus was revealing to them. They suddenly recognized Jesus for who he really was, for what he represented both in this life and the one to come. And as the light of Jesus' presence shone on them, they were transfigured that day, to see the next steps in their lives in terms of their potential.

Think about it: in this transfiguration story, Jesus does not focus on himself, but on those who were with him. The story is as much about them as it is about him. It is here that they see the connection of their lives to the stories they grew up with about Moses and Elijah. Now their eyes were finally opened to the direction Moses and Elijah had pointed, the direction that Jesus was now revealing.

They wanted to memorialize that, but Jesus simply seems to say to them: "Our journey continues. Maybe you have now realized and are aware of what is really happening. So now let's get moving." Yes, something had happened to Peter, James, and John that day, on that mountain, and Jesus was never to be the same for them again. They had encountered that "thin place" between God and themselves, and their eyes were open to see, in the fullest possible sense, the reality and power of God that can sometimes blind us in its wonder and power.

That was the turning point for them. We might also pray for the vision to see things, at those turning points in our own lives, in terms of their true and full potential. As someone once said, "the longest journey is the journey inward." In our own transition times, we might pray for moments of seeing our friends, our spouse, our church, our diocese, our work place, our country transfigured. For the reflection of Jesus' presence in such moments can serve as the power to go on being faithful and loving and creative, because we are seeing those turning point times in a new light - his light.

It was this insight from Barbara Brown Taylor's sermon that started me thinking in a new way about how our faith, how our Sunday worship, how our daily prayers, can penetrate into and intersect with our daily lives. Currently in almost all the presidential debates candidates are being asked how their spiritual faith connects with their lives. Can you and I try to do that?

I pray that our Lenten time ahead may be a turning point for each of us in the way we perceive our lives, and I hope that what we experience together in our service of worship will be a "thin place" where the two levels of reality - faith and life - meet and intersect, thus transforming our lives. For that is that is why we come together here in St. James' Church: to behold God and to experience his presence, as the one in whom we live and have our being, all around us and within us.

AMEN