

Transfigured

*“Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and John,
and led them up a high mountain apart, by themselves.
And he was transfigured before them, and his clothes became dazzling white,
such as no one on earth could bleach them.” Mark 9:2-3*

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It begins innocently enough. Jesus takes Peter, James, and John to a mountainside for a quiet moment of prayer. But then, like a Salvador Dali painting, the mundane contours of just another day with Jesus explode into a scene of spectacular surrealism. His dingy cloak suddenly become whiter than the whitest snow. The familiar features of his face have a new radiance.

But it must have been the appearance of Moses and Elijah out of thin air that really started the disciples’ heads spinning. They can only overhear bits and pieces of the conversation, something about Jerusalem, death, destiny, departure. The disciples don’t fully grasp what they are witnessing, but they know enough to want to cling to Jesus and his friends, to capture this divine interruption into their dreary lives by making homes for these holy visitors.

But no, that’s not the plan. The intimacy of this strange conversation among three prophetic figures is ominously overshadowed by darkening skies, and then from nowhere comes the Voice. The Voice that sets Jesus apart from the others, singling him out, not merely as another prophet, but as ‘Son,’ the ‘Chosen One.’ But the Voice has something more to say: ‘listen to him!’ And then, just like that, it’s over.

Let’s confess our bewilderment. We moderns don’t know what to do with this text. Does this purport to be a literal account of an historical event? Is it the report of a dream or a vision? Or is this merely a poetic and imagined interlude in Mark’s gospel designed to teach us some theological truths about who Jesus is?

This last reading—as metaphor—is the one favored by most contemporary biblical scholars, uncomfortable as they are with the truly miraculous. To read

the Transfiguration text as allegory is surely a safer, less threatening course. On this view, the text tells a rather tidier lesson than the full-blown story itself.

Moses stands for the Law, Elijah for the prophets, and Jesus, of course, is the Messiah. By naming Jesus as “my Son, the Chosen,” God thus sets Christ over the law and the prophets and teaches that a new covenant has been established. These words also remind us of Jesus’ baptism, when this same Voice came from the heavens, declaring Jesus to be God’s beloved. But this time, the Voice adds, ‘Listen to him!’ letting Peter, James and John know in no uncertain terms that they are now to be followers. And, perhaps most importantly, we learn that the purpose of such mountaintop experiences is not just for the fun of it, but rather to strengthen us for the climb back down the mountain, into the mayhem of the world, toward Golgotha, where the real work and sacrifice remains to be accomplished.

For all I know, this allegorical reading of the text may well be what Jesus or Mark or God means for us to get from this strange reading; but it's important to note that the text itself does not say any of those things, and that to read it as mere metaphor domesticates the words we’re given. On its own terms, this is a wild and unruly story, one that describes a scene that is so beyond ordinary human experience that it leaves most of us flummoxed.

It is also important to note that Mark is not the only one to tell the story. Both Matthew and Luke have their own versions of this same strange encounter. And, there is also a fourth account of the Transfiguration in St. Peter’s second epistle, one that has less visual detail, but that is quite emphatic about what happened: in Peter’s words, ‘we ourselves heard this voice come from heaven, while we were with Jesus on the mountain.’

That four different New Testament writers tell this story, each in his own way, says to me two things. One, that we should pay attention. And two, that this is not just theological commentary, but that something profound occurred that day, something quite real, even if ultimately mysterious. It’s hard to say exactly what; except perhaps to say that on that day, and in that moment, God’s world and ours somehow bumped into each other. We call these collisions between the divine and the human ‘liminal spaces.’

This idea of ‘liminal space,’ of the interlocking relationship between heaven and earth, runs throughout the gospels. From beginning to end, Jesus’ core proclamation is that God’s Kingdom is not some distant and future reality, some other ‘place,’ but God’s Kingdom is, in some very real sense, already here, if we only look with the eyes of faith. The fancy term they teach us in seminary

for this notion is ‘realized eschatology,’ which just means that God’s Kingdom is simultaneously future (not yet) and present (already here).

Poets, artists, musicians, sages, children, and some wise, old people understand this truth. For most of us, though, we’re so busy making ends meet and just getting through the day, that we usually miss the glory that lurks within the mundane.

There are moments, though, when God takes us by surprise and reveals Himself. My own meager glimpse into a liminal space happened over twenty years ago, just before Christmas. I was then a busy lawyer at a big firm in Washington, although I had just embarked upon the process of discerning whether I might be called to change vocation, and to become a priest. I had talked with my Rector, made my application, and was waiting to hear from the diocese whether I would be invited to move forward toward seminary and then ordination.

Then one morning a call came from my Rector, telling me that my bishop at the time, the late Jane Dixon, had just announced her retirement and that this would mean that any decision about my candidacy for the priesthood would have to wait for at least a year, maybe longer, until a new bishop was elected. I was crestfallen. I was in my mid-forties, and the thought of having to wait for another year or two for a decision about whether I could even start the 3-5 year process toward ordination seemed too much to bear.

At the time I was also incredibly swamped at work preparing for a trial that was set to start right after Christmas. I had been working day and night at the office, not able to spend much time with my family. They were understandably frustrated with me. And to make matters worse, I had not found the time to go out and get our Christmas tree and here it was just a few days before Christmas.

I was stressed about my upcoming trial, depressed about my prospects about becoming a priest, and at odds with my family. I was in no mood to go out late at night to pick a Christmas tree. But I went anyway, driving down Wisconsin Avenue toward the tree farm where we always got our tree. On my way there, in the silence of my car, I came to a decision: this business about giving up my law practice to become a priest was crazy. It was taking too much time, too much energy, and was asking too much of my family. I would withdraw.

Having made up my mind, I arrived at the tree farm. I parked my car, got out, and started wandering amidst the rows of trees. It was a cold, clear night. As I looked down one of the rows of trees, suddenly, seemingly out of nowhere, emerged a graceful, older woman. I did not recognize her at first. Before I knew what happened, she stepped toward me, grabbed my hands in hers, looked me in the eyes and said: "Luther, it's so good to see you. I hope you'll be patient with us. I promise: all will be well." And, as quickly as she emerged from the trees, the woman was gone.

I have no idea why Bishop Dixon was there that night at that time. And, I have no idea what, if anything, I said to her, so startled was I by her appearance. But what I do know is that her utterly unexpected presence that night, the simple words she spoke to me, and the gentle touch of her hands, led me to where I needed to go.

The skeptical will call it a coincidence. And I certainly cannot prove that this serendipitous encounter with a Bishop, late at night, in the middle of a grove of Christmas trees, was a real epiphany. But I can tell you that I experienced this chance meeting as utter grace, as a moment of transfiguration that left no doubt in my mind as to what I should do.

Such experiences humble and astound. Maybe you have had one like it; but then again maybe you haven't. God comes to us in all sorts of ways, I've learned: sometimes He comes in the drama of a vision or powerful experience, but perhaps more often He shows up in the small miracles of our day: the brightening face of a child seeing a butterfly for the first time, the soft and subtle movements of a couple standing barefoot on the beach watching the waves roll in, the spontaneous smile of a lonely, old woman surprised by the visit of a long, lost friend.

The writer John Updike, who is buried in my little church's memorial garden in Manchester, once remarked: "if there is no God, then the world is nothing more than a freak show. And I do not experience the world as a freak show." And then Updike added: "It is not that I have had a beatific vision or some other emphatically clear revelation from God. It is, rather, that I keep hearing whispers from the wings of the stage."

I am convinced that God is often whispering to us from the wings of the stage, or peeking at us from behind the face of a chance encounter. Every once and so often, when we pay attention, we are allowed to see something so touching, so incandescent, so alive, that the experience transfigures both what

we see and who we are. These are the liminal spaces, the liminal moments, in our lives.

I'm convinced something like this happened that day on the holy mountain to Peter, James, and John. The historians can say what they will about the story. To me what really matters is this: These three men suddenly saw Jesus in a new way, in a way that would change their lives forever. They sensed his kinship with the great prophets like Moses and Elijah. Yet, they also could see that Jesus belonged to God like no other. But perhaps more than all these things, the disciples knew now, that, come what may, they were called to listen to him. They wouldn't always do so, of course; and at times they would fail miserably. But they could no longer pretend that they hadn't heard God's urgent invitation: This is my Son, my Chosen, listen to him.