

TEXT: Matthew 17:1-9  
THEME: Jesus embodies the gamut of human possibilities  
SUBJECT: Transfiguration  
TITLE: Interrupted by God

Transfiguration  
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“The lightening flashes from east to west, illuminating the whole horizon and striking where it pleases and at the same instant the infinite liberty of God flashes in the depths of the soul, and we are illumined.”  
Thomas Merton, *Thoughts in Solitude*.

Brenda was on her first ride in a horse drawn wagon in mile high mountains. It was after dinner, after the evening camp fire talk, after darkness swallowed the tall pine trees. The wagon held about 15 teenagers and a couple of camp counselors. The teenagers were talking, laughing, paying attention to each other, sorting out who liked whom.

It was a clear, picture perfect, starry night. Brenda looked up into a brilliantly lit, star spangled sky. The infinite liberty of God flashed in the depth of her soul. A rush of awe dissolved the boundaries of her ego, disclosing the borderless, luminous, abiding ground of being.

At the time, Brenda did not have these words to name her experience. A well-meaning camp counselor tried to name it for her. The counselor tried to frame the experience within the boundaries of her own spiritual understanding. She could not be dissuaded from imposing her interpretation on Brenda’s experience.

Sometimes we talk when silence is needed. Stanley Hauerwas’ description of his mother fits the counselor: “She could not learn because she never shut up long enough to listen.” Stanley went on to say of himself: “I was smart, but I had not yet learned to listen. I am not sure how any of us learns to listen, but I suspect for people like me, people who seem ‘in control,’ you simply have to be ‘stopped.’”

If we know anything of Peter from the gospel stories about him, we know he liked to be in control. The infinite liberty of God flashed in the depth of his soul and his immediate response was to contain it, wrap it up and put a bow on it, secure it for safe keeping.

Peter, like Stanley’s mother, like Brenda’s camp counselor, won’t shut up. He talks and talks and talks. *While he is still talking*, a voice from the cloud interrupts him. Peter needed to be stopped before he would listen.

While the flash of light evoked a torrent of speech from Peter, the sound of a voice from the cloud shut him up. It also terrified him. He falls prostrate, unable to speak, unable to move, unable to look up. Jesus comes to him, touches him, and says, “Get up and do not be afraid.”

“Fear translates into a desire for intensified control” (Ben Quash). What Peter needs to learn is that he is not in control. He can no more manage the infinite liberty of God than he can control a flash of lightening. All he can do is shut up and listen. For the rest of his time with Jesus, Peter will struggle with this. He continually tries to direct what Jesus does, where Jesus goes, who Jesus hangs out with, rather than listen to him.

On this last Sunday in Epiphany, we read the story of Jesus’ transfiguration. The voice from heaven echoes the words spoken from heaven at Jesus’ baptism: “This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.” This affirmation of Jesus’ identity, this confirmation of God’s love for him, does not save him from pain and suffering.

Matthew's artistry is here on full display. The transfiguration story has a dark twin, the story of Jesus' crucifixion. Dale Alison says these two stories are like two paintings with similar outlines but different colors. If one scene were sketched on a transparency and placed over the other, many of its lines would disappear.

In the transfiguration we have three male disciples; in the crucifixion we have three female disciples. In the transfiguration Jesus is elevated on a mountain; in the crucifixion he is elevated on a cross. On the mountain Jesus is transfigured into light; on the cross a supernatural darkness descends. In the first case Jesus' garments are illuminated, in the second they are stripped off.

On the mountain Jesus is glorified; on the cross he is shamed. On the mountain two saints appear; on the cross two criminals hang beside Jesus. On the mountain God claims Jesus as his own. On the cross God abandons Jesus. It is a pagan soldier who declares Jesus to be the Son of God. On the mountain the disciples bow in reverent prostration before Jesus; on the cross the onlookers mock Jesus with prostration.

Jesus embodies both the depths of pain and anguish which human beings know, as well as that which all long for - transfiguration into some state beyond such pain and anguish. Jesus is the paradigm of both despair and hope; he is humanity debased and humanity glorified.

Mountain top experiences do not spare us the walk through the valley of the shadow of death. Knowing we belong to God, knowing we are beloved by God, does not save us from feeling abandoned by God. The spiritual life begins in listening when God interrupts us and ends in obedience when God is silent.

Mary Oliver. "When the Roses Speak, I Pay Attention"

"As long as we are able to  
be extravagant we will be  
hugely and damply  
extravagant. Then we will drop  
foil by foil to the ground. This  
is our unalterable task, and we do it  
joyfully."

And they went on. "Listen,  
the heart-shackles are not, as you think,  
death, illness, pain,  
unrequited hope, not loneliness, but

lassitude, rue, vainglory, fear, anxiety,  
selfishness."

Their fragrance all the while rising  
from their blind bodies, making me  
spin with joy.

What dims the transfiguring light within is not, as we think, death, illness, pain, unrequited hope, loneliness. What extinguishes the light within is weariness, bitter regret, vanity, fear, anxiety, selfishness.

Our unalterable task is not to be in control, not to be safe and secure, but to be so extravagantly, joyfully, who we are, daughters and sons of God, that the light of God shines forth from us even as our strength and beauty fade and fall away.

Be not afraid! Make your life a fragrant offering to God, so the world may spin in joy.