

TEXT: Mark 9:2-8
THEME: It is good for us to be here
SUBJECT: Transfiguration
TITLE: Veiled

Transfiguration
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From time to time an extraordinary thing happens, the veil is lifted and we are awakened to a deep visceral realization that this is real. These are moments that disclose to us the inherent holiness of life.

In these moments we experience complete unity within us and around us. This may happen when we stand on a mountaintop and are captivated by the view. It may happen when we witness the birth of a child or the death of a friend. It may happen when we have an intimate conversation or a family meal.

It may happen in church during worship or in a quiet room during prayer. But whenever and however it happens we say to ourselves: "This is it . . . everything fits . . . all I ever hoped for is here."

Henry Nouwen believes this is what happened to Peter, James and John on top of the mountain when they saw the aspect of Jesus' face change and his clothing become sparkling white. For a brief moment, the veil is lifted, and the favored three disciples catch a glimpse of the glory of God in the humanity of Jesus. They wanted that moment to last forever.

These moments are given to us to remember when God seems far away and everything appears empty and useless. These experiences are true moments of grace. Surely, such a demonstration of the glory of God will see the disciples through whatever comes.

But it doesn't. When the clouds move in, we have trouble remembering the vision on the mountaintop. It is a hard lesson to learn: that we should trust those rare moments of clear insight and heightened joy that are granted us from time to time, and should let them help us through the long hours of doubt and sadness.

When the day of reckoning arrives and Jesus is arrested and put on trial, Peter betrays him. It is easy from a distance to be hard on Peter, but we who live post Easter fare no better. Peter was granted a vision, a foretaste of future glory, but the vision didn't see him through the valley of the shadow of death. His fear, his instinct for self-preservation, made him forget, or at least not trust, the glory he saw on the mountain top.

Returning to the daily routines, to a life that may seem in many ways a kind of trap or dead-end street, veils whatever glimpse of glory and holiness we may have been granted. However, having once experienced the lifting of the veil, if we keep our eyes peeled and our ears open, if we really pay attention, even a limited and limiting life can open onto extraordinary vistas.

Frederick Buechner describes his own experience of learning to pay attention. You take the children to school and kiss your wife goodbye. Eat lunch with a friend. Try to do a decent day's work. Hear the rain patter against the window. No event is so commonplace but that God is present within it, always veiled, always leaving room to recognize him or not to recognize him, but all the more fascinatingly because of that, all the more compellingly and hauntingly.

We need, he believes, to see life for the fathomless mystery that it is. In the boredom and the pain of it no less than the excitement and gladness: touch, taste, smell your way to the holy and hidden heart of it because in the last analysis all moments are key moments and life itself is grace.

The transfiguration story is a summons to look at what is happening around us from a different angle of vision. We climb the mountain to see what we cannot see in the valley. This mountain is not found on a map of Palestine. This is the mountain of revelation, the mountain of transformed vision, the mountain of spontaneous contemplative awareness, the mountain of true seeing.

The rejection, failure and violence Jesus, Peter, James and John experience down in the valley cast a long shadow over the glory glimpsed on the mountain. Down in the valley, it is often hard to see how the vision can be maintained. Down in the valley, with our faith buffeted by storms of disregard, doubt and disdain, it is easy to dismiss the vision as illusion, as wishful thinking, to believe we were deceived.

When the veil is lifted and we catch a glimpse of the glory of God in the face of creation, in the beautiful face of a lover, in the trusting face of a child, in the deep furrows lining the aged face of a woman who has suffered much, who knows much, we are granted something that we can spend the rest of our life being faithful to, learning to enter into, learning to trust.

The subject matter is the subject within your own heart, which has been awakened within you, as what you intuitively recognize to be most precious and most real in your life. These are the moments in which you simply have to have faith, which you intuitively know this is real, and it is beyond doubting because it stands invincibly true. Absent such faith you will go crazy.

Cultivating a childlike trust in the integrity and reality and the depths and the holiness of that which is fleetingly granted to us in these moments, that we not play the cynic, that we not break faith with what our child heart knows to be true, is to share in the transfiguration of the world.

