

SERMON: Each year, as the church prepares to leave the season of Epiphany and enter the season of Lent, Christians are invited to listen once again to the story of the Transfiguration of Jesus. According to the gospel writers, the story of Transfiguration begins as Jesus leaves his demanding work among the poor and needy of this world, and goes to the mountain. Like many a Pastor, Jesus often took breaks from his ministry to get badly needed rest; Jesus enjoyed solitary places where he could listen for the voice of God, and be renewed in spirit through prayer. Like many before him, Jesus sought out for his Sabbaths what Celtic Christians have termed 'thin places' - the places in our world where *"the distance between heaven and earth collapses . . . places where we are able to catch glimpses of the Divine . . ."*

Some time ago, while serving as Associate Conference Minister, the staff of the New Hampshire Conference took a one-day retreat to deepen our understanding of one another. One of the questions we were asked to discuss with each other, was the question, "Where do you experience the presence of God?" Not surprisingly, almost everyone mentioned the nearness of God in nature - the ocean, the mountains, even the desert. For our staff, like so many, the world of nature can be a 'thin place' - a place where God seems palpably near. So it was for Jesus. When Jesus wanted to draw close to God, he would head for the nearest mountain - a place where the solitude and stillness of the natural world would allow God's voice to be heard.¹

When I first began pastoral ministry, I didn't think much about my need for Sabbath. Somewhat naively, I believed that my daily work with Christian people and my regular study of the Bible would be sufficient nourishment for my spirit and soul. I soon discovered it wasn't sufficient, however, and that I needed to slip away to a quiet place of retreat for my own spiritual needs to be met. And there came a time, some 25 years into ministry, when I realized that even these practices were not sufficient. I could see that my enthusiasm and creativity were fading, and I needed to do something to rebuild what I thought of as my spiritual soil. After discussing my situation with trusted colleagues, I approached my congregation about taking a Sabbatical - something I had never done. After some initial hesitancy, they embraced the idea and granted me several months of time away. It was a life-giving experience! The months of Sabbatical allowed me to rebuild my spiritual soil, to refill my spiritual well, and to gain new dreams and hopes for the church I served. It was a renewing experience for me, and for the congregation, and become a regular part of my plan for spiritual health in the midst of pastoral ministry.

The ancient biblical writers knew what they were doing when they called for Sabbath to be part of our lives. It's not just ministers that need a break; it's not just ministers that need to step away from the pressing demands of life so that the voice of God can be heard. I think that all of us would benefit from finding times and places when we can be still and draw close to God - times of Sabbath. Feeling a need for Sabbath rest, Jesus takes to the mountain, bringing with him his closest disciples, Peter, James and John. While on the mountain, a cloud descends upon them and the disciples see in the cloudy mist the 'forms' of Elijah and Moses talking with Jesus; and, for a brief moment, they see the form of Jesus changed (transfigured) into a

¹ Commentators are careful to note that Jesus retreated to a real mountain, probably Mount Hermon (9000 feet). e.g. Wm. Lane, *Mark* (NIC, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids: 1974) p. 318, n. 20.

translucent, brilliant white, shining body. As the disciples stare in wonder, a voice is heard from heaven saying, "This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!"

I'm reading David Brooks book *How to Know a Person: the Art of Seeing Others Deeply and Being Deeply Seen*, and not surprisingly, I'm learning that one of paths to knowing someone deeply is listening carefully to what they are saying. Transfiguration asserts that the same is true for one who is keen on knowing God. We know God best when we listen to God's voice, whether in nature, in the Wisdom of trusted faithful friends, in the words of our hymns and liturgy, or in the words of our spiritual ancestors as recorded for us in Scripture. Pausing to listen and to listen deeply, is a healthy path for faith and for life.

So far, you may be agreeing with me that rest and careful listening are good, yet you may be wondering about the importance of Transfiguration itself? 'What you're saying is helpful,' you may be thinking, 'but why devote a Sunday each year to telling this story?' Let me offer two reasons why I think the Transfiguration story was important to the Gospel writers, and is important to us:

(1) First, Transfiguration is important because, like Jesus' birth, baptism, and resurrection, it reveals something deeply significant about him. It tells us that Jesus comes from God and returns to God, that Jesus is a Chosen One, a man touched by the Glory of God and bearing a word from God. The Gospel writers tell us this story because it is one of those rare transformative moments, when divine glory touches human ordinariness. One moment Jesus is dusty, sweaty, and weary from teaching, touching, and healing crowds of people in the unrelenting heat of the Middle East; the next, he is overshadowed and illumined by the shining glory of God. Transfiguration tells us something about who Jesus really is.

(2) Second, the Transfiguration is a story whose roots lie deep within the soil of Israel's faith. Israel believes in a God who makes appearances upon earth, appearances that shape human destinies and alter the course of history. Most often, God comes to the mountain to meet with God's chosen leaders. Thus Moses is summoned to the mountain to meet with God. While there, his appearance is altered. His face glows with such intensity that, having descended from the mountain carrying with him God's law, the people cannot look directly at him. Like Moses, Jesus goes to the mountain and his appearance is similarly altered. Both leaders return from the mountain touched by the Glory of God and empowered to teach and lead their people. Transfiguration places Jesus squarely within Israel's understanding and experience of their God.

Jesus goes to the mountain to find rest and solitude, and there is Transfigured. The late Tom Hunter was a minister and musician in the United Church of Christ. In his article "During the Hymn: Thoughts while Singing" he tells how on one Sunday morning his congregation was singing 'The Church's One Foundation,' "a hymn," he says, "that his father would have called 'an old chestnut.'" He sang the familiar and heart-warming tune that morning without much thought for what he was singing until he started singing the last verse. There, the words about heavenly rest caught his attention - the words,

"mystic sweet communion with those whose rest is won" started him thinking. 'Who are these,' he wondered, 'whose rest is won?' Immediately he thought of his 19-year-old brother that had died, his nine-day old niece, his wife's parents, a friend's dying father. "Suddenly," he writes, "their pain was so real I don't remember singing the last lines. I do remember wiping tears off the hymnal. What a relief for those people to win a little rest." Then, as the choir sang, the image spread as he thought of others who need rest here and now. The Haitian father screaming as he carried an injured child, two friends who battle depression, the family whose adopted kids have lived on the streets. The list grew and became a prayer for people and places of struggle. "O God, let a little rest be won."

For this minister, his visit to church had begun like any other visit to church. His climb up the mountain was much like any other climb up the mountain. Not much invested; not much expected. But, to his surprise, a cloud descended upon him in the form of an old chestnut hymn; a hymn that he didn't even like very well became a 'thin place.' And God spoke to him, and stirred up within him a prayer for the many people of his world living in pain and struggle.

Sometime long ago, an old Puritan mystic, seeking help for his own spirit, penned the following prayer.

"Lord, high and holy, meek and lowly, thou hast brought me to the valley of vision,
where I live in the depths but see thee in the heights;
Let me find thy light in my darkness, thy life in my death, thy joy in my sorrow,
thy grace in my sin, thy riches in my poverty, thy glory in my valley."

May this prayer be ours as well as we journey in our valleys, only dimly aware of the glory that once was seen on the mountaintop. Amen.