

Transfiguration Sunday

February 15, 2015

"AMAZING SIGHTS"

By Pastor Mary Anne Biggs

2 Corinthians 4:3-6 ~ Mark 9:2-9

When John's parents were alive we used to spend Christmas in Santa Fe, New Mexico. We would pack the car as soon as school was over and head west. John's parents loved Santa Fe and so did we, and it gave us a good chance to experience a white Christmas ... something that was never going to happen in the Texas Hill Country where we all lived. I'd like to tell you that I was drawn by the amazing art museums in Santa Fe, but the real clincher for me was the food. In my opinion, the best Mexican food in the world is served up in Santa Fe. And Santa Fe has an indescribable charm ... its meandering streets converging on a wonderful plaza that teems with unusual shops and studios. I'm just nuts about Santa Fe. But I could never say the same thing about Albuquerque. Now I don't want to get any nasty letters from their chamber of commerce, so let me say this is just *my* opinion. The people there are great. Nan Pophal's daughter lives there and she's one of my favorite people in the world. But the scenery ... it just didn't do it for me.

A couple of years ago I flew into Albuquerque to visit my brother and sister-in-law who were living in Santa Fe. You have to land in Albuquerque because it has the only airport. After they picked me up, they thought it would be fun to picnic at the top of Sandia Peak, which - if any of you have ever been there, you know it's the big lump of a mountain with a flat top that dominates Albuquerque. I never thought it was a very pretty mountain as mountains go. I knew we'd have a wonderful lunch because my sister-in-law is a great cook, but I couldn't help but wonder why we just didn't head right into Santa Fe ... and if truth be told, head straight for any number of my favorite Mexican restaurants. However, an amazing thing happened when we got there. The earth changed dramatically. The air became cool. Dry sand and dusty rocks became a lush forest with magnificent boulders. The view from the top was breathtaking. On the other side of the mountain was a ski area ... beautiful and green with summer vegetation. Looking back the way we came you could see the entire valley. The city of Albuquerque looked glorious. We had a fabulous time and the experience transformed the whole day for me. It lifted my spirit. It was truly a mountain top experience.

Now I have been blessed to see some amazing sights in my time. In centuries past, the majority of people never traveled more than hundred miles from the place they were born during their entire lives. But travel is easy and relatively affordable in our day. So I have seen the Grand Canyon and San Francisco Bay and the sea lions of the Pacific. I've been to Monument Valley and Martha's Vineyard. I have seen the mountainous sky scrapers in Hong Kong and the wondrous temples of Japan. I've visited the splendid capitals of Europe and the Mayan ruins of

Mexico. But - big deal! It isn't what you see ... but how it affects you ... that matters. Sight is useless, unless at some level it is accompanied by insight.

Our gospel story today is about an amazing sight that three disciples beheld. They climbed to the mountain top with Jesus. And there they had, well, "a mountain top experience." Suddenly Jesus was transfigured - the Greek word is "metamorphosized" - before their eyes. He glittered. He shined. He dazzled. Elijah and Moses stood with him. The disciples saw all this and couldn't believe their eyes. And they were stunned stupid by what they saw! They shook and quaked. They stuttered and stammered. Peter started to chatter, and had the bright idea of building three shrines and camping out on the mountain top. Mark even apologized for Peter, explaining, "He didn't know what to say; they were terrified." So God had to tell them to get quiet and listen for a change. In the presence of the holy, we should all have the sense at least to keep our mouths shut.

Mark set this story in a section of material bracketed by stories of Jesus giving sight to the blind (8:22-26, 10:46-52). And between these two stories we discover that it's the disciples who are really blind. Oh, they see Jesus healing the sick and confronting religious prejudice ... and they hear his teachings about suffering and predictions of the cross. But they just don't get it. They don't understand, and they disagree. They have no insight. And nowhere is that clearer than on the mount of transfiguration.

The story is so loaded with symbolism that it is almost dreamlike. The mountain represents Sinai (where God met Moses) and Carmel (where God answered Elijah's prayers) ... the two most significant epiphanies of the Hebrew Bible. Moses and Elijah represent the Torah and the Prophets ... the two major sections of the Hebrew Bible. They stand with Jesus, who is the fulfillment of the scripture. God speaks out of the cloud as God spoke out of the cloud to Israel during the exodus. God says, "*This is my Son, the beloved,*" the same words Jesus heard at his baptism in Mark 1. Mark is trying to tell us that the glorious Jesus of the transfiguration is the same Jesus who has been with the disciples all along. They just haven't been able to see it.

The Gospels wrestle with a question which has plagued the church ever since Jesus came. How could God dwell among us in human flesh and the majority of the people not see? The Jews were *expecting* a Messiah and they did not see him. Instead, they saw a blasphemer. The Greco-Romans thought that the world was charged with spiritual presence and accepted any number of healers and shamans. But they did not see God in Jesus. Instead, they saw a rebel leader. But the biggest mystery seems to be Jesus' own disciples. Except for brief moments of insight, they did not see Jesus, either. The Gospel writers give any number of reasons: Jesus told them not to tell anyone until after the resurrection. *Or*: they understood, but not completely, because Jesus had not yet fully disclosed his identity to them. *Or*: they kept getting the reality of Jesus confused with their expectations about the Messiah ... that he would be a great military figure and rule like a mighty King. But there is no escaping one of the central facts of the Jesus story when it comes to the disciples. They were spiritually stupid. They were especially slow. They were profoundly dull-witted. They were really dim bulbs!

Ah, but are we so different? There are times when we long for a glimpse of the glory of God ... we pray for it ... we beg for it. But maybe Christ is always with us and we are afraid to see him

as he is. Maybe the glory of God is all around us all the time, but we lack the insight to understand our eyesight. In *The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat*, neurologist Oliver Sacks tells the story of a man who tried to grab his wife's head one day as they were leaving his office, thinking it was his hat. The man, an accomplished musician, had nothing wrong with his hearing ... he had nothing wrong with his vision, either. That is, his eyes were fine. But something was wrong in his brain so that he could not process the pieces of information his eyes were providing and integrate them into a whole picture. He could see a nose, a mouth, an eye and an ear, but he could not put them together into a face. Likewise, the story of the transfiguration may suggest that we can see the glory of God all around us, but we lack the spiritual capacity to integrate what we see into a picture of the presence of God. It seems that sometimes, despite our best efforts, we are surrounded by the holy and we don't know how to respond.

How do we open our eyes and see? How do we gain the insight to see the holy around us and how do we respond when we do? One of the best sources of the glory of God is the people around us. A clergy friend of mine had a member of her congregation who was shy, quiet, almost mousy ... not someone who served on boards ... but faithful in attendance. One day, a man in the congregation had a heart attack during the service. And this woman was transfigured before them. It turned out that she was a retired nurse. She knew just what to do. She took charge, administered CPR, and helped everyone else stay calm. She saved his life. My friend said, "It was glorious! But who knew?"

Can we become trained observers of God's glory incarnate in the flesh and blood around us? I did one morning as I was driving in Chicago with my friend Eliza. As you can well imagine, you can see some interesting sights of those city streets, but the one that I will always remember was the sight of a young woman dancing at a bus stop. She was looking at the sky with defiant joy, an obvious reflection of the beat and the lyrics pulsing through her headphones. Cars were crawling by with radios blasting other music, but she couldn't hear their music and she was undaunted by their stares. She was at one with her music and she just had to dance. I hoped she could come back to earth, at least in time to catch her bus, but I hoped even more that she would always hear her music ... feel the beat and become transformed so that she could transfigure the world.

What is the music that could open your eyes to that which is beyond noisy traffic ... to that which brings defiant joy in the face of material pressures ... to that which could transform you and transfigure the world ... to that which lets you see Christ among us and yourself in Christ?

To see each other ... to truly behold the glory that God has planted in every human alive ... we must learn to listen to the music ... to behold with the eyes of the poet and the lover ... with the eyes of God, who loves us as we are and sees what we might be. But my friends, spiritual vision is difficult to nurture. Usually we don't see the holy because we don't really want to ... it's just too terrifying!

In a word, you will not see even remnants of God's glory unless you have the courage to look. You will not see unless you have the patience to wait and watch. You have to stop, look, and listen. You have to still the noise around you, and harder still, the noise within. Even then it will be a brief glimpse of glory. But that brief glimpse is "a gift, an abundance" and gives us the

strength to follow Christ back down into the valley ... where the conflicts between good and evil rage and the wounded await healing.

The disciples told no one about this until after they met the risen Christ on another mountain top and he said, "Do you get it now? Finally, do you get it?" Perhaps they did, but what about those who followed them? Just a few centuries passed before, on the traditional site of the transfiguration, the 1,000 foot hill of Mount Tabor rising above the Valley of Jezreel, three shrines *were* built by Byzantine Christians in honor of Moses, Elijah, and Jesus. They missed the point. They still didn't get it. We cannot camp out on the mountain top. We cannot preserve the glory of any given moment. We cannot nail Jesus down. Jesus leads us on to the next glory ... the next mountain top experience ... and the journey takes us through the valley again ... through the cloud and fog ... through the dreary desert ... sometimes, even to a cross.

Next week we begin our Lenten journey to the cross of Christ and beyond that to the resurrection. We would hope that each time we enter our sanctuary, we will be breathless with the expectation of the One we will meet here ... with what we might behold in this place. If only we could realize that worship can be that weekly mountain top time with Christ when we get still long enough to listen and look hard enough to see the glory of God which shines in the sanctuary and among the people of God when the Lord has passed among us. When that happens ... when we experience God's glory even for a few fleeting moments ... then we can go back out to the streets and not grow weary with well doing. And even those fleeting occasional moments will be enough for us to say, "I do get it. Finally, I get it." So let us journey on ... with ears and eyes open wide! Let us pray.

Speak to us out of the silence, dear God. Reveal yourself to us and give us insight to match the marvelous sights around us. In the beauty of the earth, in the touch of another hand, in the mountains and the valleys of our own experience, show us your glory. By the power of your Spirit, let our minds be opened and our hearts awakened and the world transfigured so that we see - if only for a moment - everywhere, your glory. And we will serve you in gratitude, and follow you from peak to peak to peak, in Jesus' name. Amen.