

The Transfiguration
February 7, 2016

"SEE HERE!"
by Mary Anne Biggs

Exodus 34:29-35 ~ Luke 9:28-43a

Several years ago when I was in seminary I walked along the shore of Lake Michigan on a cool spring afternoon to enjoy the view and to meditate for a while. It had been one of those days when community life had become a little oppressive and I felt overwhelmed by the demands of both seminary and church. I felt like getting in my car and maybe driving to Mexico, but Lake Michigan was closer.

It was a week day, a little cool, so when I reached the promontory, I was alone. But after I had been there about ten minutes or so this guy came scuffling up and sat down on a rock not far from me. He was unremarkable ... on the small side, dressed in jeans and a soiled old army jacket with a few days growth on his face which might have been the beginning of a beard or the lack of a razor. He didn't look threatening, and he probably would have been terrified of me if he learned I was a UCC preacher. I figured he was there for the same reason I was. So I turned away to give us both the privacy we were seeking.

Then, suddenly, out of nowhere, this guy started singing. And he had a voice! I mean, it was rich, clear, soaring. I didn't know the song or even the language it was in, but it was beautiful ... and he sang it with such a melancholy passion that I was moved to tears. After the song, he got quiet again, and we sat there in silence another ten minutes or so. I started to feel cold and I had somewhere else to be, so I got up and turned to go. I thought I might just say "thank you for the song," but when I looked over, he was already gone.

I don't know if he was an angel, a wandering indigent or some famous performer. I don't know why he chose to sing when he did, but I'm glad he did. It was a little weird since it was just the two of us there. His incredible voice was the last thing I would have expected from someone who looked like that. But then, almost always there is a lot more to a person than what we see at first, isn't there? And I suppose that's why we are often surprised by an unexpected revelation of talent or an epiphany of grace.

We are dealing today with a surprising mountain top epiphany, the Transfiguration of Jesus according to Luke. But the idea of a "transfiguration" comes to us more from Mark's and Matthew's versions of the story. To describe what happens to Jesus they both use the Greek word *metemorphothes*, from which our English word "metamorphosis" is derived. A metamorphosis suggests a radical, physical transformation in Jesus. But Luke says more simply that while the disciples were watching, "the appearance of (Jesus') face changed." This suggests that the Transfiguration ... as Luke remembers it ... was more a spiritual than a physical event ... more about vision than the visual ... more about insight than eyesight.

Jesus took Peter, James and John, and they climbed up the mountain to pray. Naturally the disciples prayed with their eyes closed. They prayed with their heads bowed. And soon they were praying with loud snores and wheezes. But something stirring wakes them up and in a half asleep, half awake, are-we-dreaming-or-not stage, they see Jesus in a way they have not seen him before.

Of course, as Luke tells the story it is loaded with references to the Hebrew Scripture ... to its important mountain top epiphanies at Sinai, with Moses and Elijah, who represent the law and the prophets, that is, the Hebrew scripture. And this reminds us of the story of Israel's salvation journey, the Exodus, when God made them into a people, and led them with a cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night and spoke in an audible voice, in the earthquake, wind, and fire to Moses. It reminds us of that critical moment in Israel's history when they almost abandoned their foundational faith to take up the popular gods of Babylon, and Elijah came back to Mount Sinai, where it all began, but God most decidedly did not talk to Elijah in the earthquake, wind and fire, but in a still, small voice ... and more importantly ... in the things God went on to do in the events of history that he promised to Elijah would follow.

Now you may wonder ... how did Peter, James and John know it was Moses and Elijah who were talking to Jesus? Were they wearing name tags? Or maybe what happened was a vision, and you know how it is when you are dreaming, you just know these things without anybody having to tell you. And, what does Luke tell us Moses and Elijah and Jesus are talking about up on that mountain? Luke says they were talking about Jesus' "departure", which he was about to accomplish in Jerusalem." Only, the Greek word Luke uses here is *exodon*, Jesus' "*exodus*!"

With all this imagery about Mount Sinai and Moses and Elijah and the cloud and the *voice* and the glory of the Lord and speaking of Jesus' "exodus," is Luke trying to say that Jesus' cross and resurrection is our salvation ... our formation as a people ... our foundational moment ... our sacred past and our hopeful future? I mean, the actual scene of the cross is so inglorious with all the sweat and the blood and the spitting and cursing. And the resurrection is so mysterious and sudden. But here, even before it all happens, these disciples get a preview. They glimpse something about Jesus which is actually constant ... a glory which is still with Jesus as he goes down from this mountain to heal an epileptic child ... a glory which, though less visible, will be just as real when he is hanging on the cross.

And what does this vision say to us about our ordinary sight, only half awake and half aware of the divine presence disclosed but disguised in the ordinary people around us? A shabbily dressed stranger at Lake Michigan is gifted with a *voice*. A quiet, gentle woman is gifted with a radiant joy that lifts everyone as she walks in the door to attend Bible study. One of our dearly departed ... gifted to play the piano from the top of his head and the bottom of his heart. You just never know what graces lie within anyone that you may meet, just below the surface. But you should look, and look again. And perhaps see in this surprising disguise another miracle of grace ... another blessing sent from above ... another beloved child of God.

And it seems to me all the more important that we help each other see this holiness ... this glory of God in ourselves. How many of us look in the mirror and think, "Yuk! I'm so pathetic. I'm so

untalented. It's amazing I've come this far. I'm a terrible person." And then we go out and project those same messages to the people around us about ourselves, and about them.

How do we learn to open our eyes and see the extraordinary glory of God implanted in the very ordinary people around us, including the face of the person looking back in the mirror in the morning? And if we see that glory, if only for an instant, what will we do with this recognition of a reality underlying all of life ... all of life? How do we encourage the transformation that that seed of glory can make in each of us?

What really matters about this story is not the transformation in Jesus. "Jesus Christ, the same yesterday, today, and forever," intones the author of Hebrews. It is not Jesus who changes, but the disciples whose eyes are opened with a brief but brilliant insight into who Jesus is. But does this insight change them or does it pass like a dream into the dull light of morning? We can understand their response in the moment. They're scared out of their wits. Peter stammers and stumbles around ... starts gathering sticks to make some lean-tos. He forms a building committee. He starts making plans. This is one thing we do with the holy moment of insight. We try to capture the glory. We build a shrine. We erect a monument. "On this site on February 7th, 2016, God was extraordinarily present in this place." And we hope somehow to store the holy stuff, so we can keep it under control and visit it once in a while and make it all happen exactly the same way again. But God will have none of that.

You can't control when and where you will meet God. You can't domesticate and regulate the wild and terrifying presence of the living God. You can't imprison God within these walls of our beautiful sanctuary ... and while I hope God dwells among us and keeps doing good work here, God help us if we ever think that God isn't at work just as mightily in other churches and just as much beyond the church, just out among the people. And we can't hold on to the moment of glory ... we can't recreate what has already happened. We will surely meet God in this place again but it will be in a different way and even in a different place, one that is farther along in our exodus journeys.

Peter starts chattering ... "Praise the Lord! Hallelujah! Isn't this great? Isn't this wonderful! We'll build a cathedral! We'll televise the services. We'll set up a theme park." And God says, "Peter, hush up! Listen to Jesus." In the glorious moment we want to do something ... we want to say something ... but often the best response to the holy is simply silence. When God is present ... when the glory is revealed in the person before you ... stop and listen. Be still and be. Offer to God your undivided attention. Then offer to God your undivided self. The time for talk will come and God will lead you to bear witness. The time for action will come and God will lead you to do great things. But before those comes the timeless moment at the center of all being when you should stand in the presence of God and simply submit.

The disciples came down off the mountain with Jesus, but did they carry this new vision, did they understand what they have seen? Apparently not, because in the very next moment, back down in the valley, they seem to have forgotten what has been revealed to them. And now it is Jesus' turn to be amazed. "You faithless and perverse generation," he says, "how much longer must I be with you and bear with you?" (Luke 9:41). And they still don't get it later in

Jerusalem, when the moment of his exodus arrives. They are not prepared for the ordeal of the cross, and they are still surprised by the resurrection.

This is the other thing we do with those momentary visions of glory we get here on the mountain top. We walk away and leave them behind just as we leave the dream on the pillow when we awaken. We quickly leave the holy moment and the sacred space behind us. It's as if it didn't happen. It's as if it didn't matter. It's as if it weren't real and the real world is the one we live in out there, with its different rules and sensibilities. This glorious time ... this treating each other with kindness and respect as children of God at church is a pleasant diversion. But do we leave it all in here when we descend into the valley of the shadow of the real world?

But see here. This is the real world, and the world out there is shrouded and illusory. As surely as the disciples caught a glimpse of the real Jesus and were dazzled ... so we open our eyes if only for a moment to a reality that is true. The person you meet out there ... the stranger, the attendant, the waitperson, the employee, the professor, the boss, the client, the opponent, the competitor, the street beggar, the arresting officer, the arrested defendant ... they are the gifted and beloved children of God. Don't forget it. Don't forget it. Don't close your eyes to the truth after your eyes have been opened, but let the light in ... let the light change you. See the people around you for whom they really are and treat them so. Then you will be transfigured, metamorphosized from a caterpillar into a butterfly and your own grace gifts will rise on the wing, and people will say, glory to God, who would have imagined it? Who could have imagined it? May we pray?

Surprising God, you have planted some measure of your glory in each one of us. Transform our vision so that we will see people as you see them. Transform our insight so we will see ourselves as you have made us to be. Transform our lives so that we will live by the Spirit who dwells continually with us, within our hearts and among our church and on the face of the next stranger we meet when we leave here today. And we will see your glory and we will say thank you, God, and we will live by the wonder of your love in Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.