

SERMONS FROM ST. FRANCIS

Transfiguration B
February 25, 2006
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Jesus Was Transfigured
Text: Mark 9:2-9

In this extraordinary story, that puzzles perhaps the modern mind, the one thing I want to impress upon you today are the simple words, "Jesus was transfigured." A lot went on around that sentence. Jesus selects from all the disciples just three of them: Peter, James and John. I am so sure that the other disciples were "so gracious" in not being selected! The three and Jesus climb a high mountain. And high on that mountain, "Jesus was transfigured." Moses and Elijah appear.

Here we have all the ingredients for the climax of the Epiphany season of the church's liturgy: a theophany -- except one thing is missing from this setting of high mountain, light and clouds. But Peter provides the opportunity to make up the one thing lacking.

Peter, being Peter, doesn't know what to say to all this, but that's not stopped him before. Silence is not one of his gifts. He opens up his mouth with the glib suggestion that the three disciples get busy building altars for Jesus, Moses and Elijah.

And because he opened his mouth, the last ingredient of a theophany, the voice of God like thunder, breaks forth. What does God say? Well, in the tradition of Sophia Petrillo of the Golden Girls, God basically said to Peter, "Shut up and listen!" St. Mark puts it more elegantly, "Listen to Jesus, my Beloved One!"

I want us to listen too -- and to learn how to listen from those three simple words, "Jesus was transfigured." For, if we learn how to listen, our pathway through life will be more brightly lit.

"Jesus was transfigured." Now what about it? Well, notice that grammatically it is not in the active, but in the passive voice: Jesus doesn't transfigure, he is transfigured by some other power. The transfiguring was done *to him*, not by him. God transfigured Jesus.

As lawyers will tell you, words are sometimes important, very important. And this is one of them. We could easily brush by those three words, filled like Peter with all the enthusiasms we could muster, and rush down the mountain to do our religion thing. No wonder Jesus ordered Peter, James and John to say nothing until the resurrection.

I kind of think the word "resurrection" was lost on them. It would have been on us too except that we are part of the community where this resurrection is at our center. We know more of the story. Notice there too, that Jesus didn't resuscitate himself -- but was

raised from the power of death. Hmm, passive voice again.

I wonder how long Peter kept his trap shut? Soon in Mark's Gospel Jesus speaks plainly about his horrible death and uses the resurrection word again. Once again Peter doesn't listen, opening his mouth to misunderstand completely, to miss how Jesus is hinting how he is to be fully transfigured.

What does this mean for us? Until we too grasp the passive power of "Jesus was transfigured" we will probably not see the meaning of this climactic epiphany for our own lives.

The trouble with preaching is that it seduces us into thinking that the preacher can tell us all we need to know. But it is not verbal knowledge, but our self-understanding of the words "Jesus was transfigured" that is needed. Preaching has its limits. Words have their limits. The best I can do is hint to you, so that you will understand yourself better standing before the transfigured Beloved One of God.

It's like this. The mountain high transfiguration is the beginning of the meaning, your meaning to Jesus' full transfiguration. I cannot find the adequate words, any more than Peter, to describe fully the mountain high part of the meaning.

But I'll try to show you. St. Francis has had a mountaintop experience in calling and ordaining a lesbian couple as your pastors. The subsequent trial and expulsion from the ELCA, and the outpouring of your solid support in the vision and courage of your faithful actions were also your mountaintop experience.

Or consider this: Coretta Scott King died a few weeks ago. Some of us relived her courageous presence next to her husband, or her being at home alone fearful for their children's lives while Martin traveled the circuit of proclamation. We relived King's great "I Have A Dream" speech in Washington, choking over how the powerful meaning his words lifted up the vision of this nation. That's a mountaintop part of the experience.

But the Kings also had to walk the road to Selma and Montgomery, Chicago and finally Memphis. The fullness of transfiguration comes down from the mountaintop highs into daily struggles and the ultimate gift of freedom.

To understand Jesus' mountaintop greatness, he had to go downhill all the way to the grave before God granted the fullness of Jesus' power in the words, "raised from the dead." But that understanding is a self-understanding, and a communal self-understanding. We too have to continue our life pilgrimage down from the liturgical highs into the sufferings of others that God may grant the resurrections of hope, freedom and healing.

To help us in our self-understanding, both personal and as St. Francis for the world, we

begin a time called Lent on Wednesday. From then on it's kind of downhill from there - starting with Ash Wednesday and the six weeks of Lent and the three Great Days through death and resurrection.

To self-understand the meaning of "Jesus was transfigured" requires us to listen for God's meaning to caring, crucifixion and resurrection, as well as to the glorious and the wondrous life given all peoples. Lent is that exercise in meaning discovery, self-discovery. And it begins on Ash Wednesday.

One thing more. I am not transfigured, I am being transfigured -- sometimes too slowly, I think. But again, I am not doing this transfiguration, I am being transfigured. God does this in different ways in different religions. But, for Christians, God begins with me in my Baptism, nourishes me at Eucharist and calls me to listen, care and even suffer for my neighbor. Isn't that true for you; true also for us as a church?

Those three little words "Jesus was transfigured" had to be grasped by Peter by his learning to listen to their passive voice, that unless God does the transfiguring our visions and plans, our sweat and tears, might well be not God's work but an altar to ourselves. That's not so bad, I suppose. But Jesus has a better way for people and for communities to live.

"Jesus was transfigured" is our invitation to be transfigured too. That's what Ash Wednesday and Lent try to show us, to help us self-understand ourselves and our wonderful, but broken, world.

Amen

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