

A woman always passed a pastry shop on her way to work – and every day went in and had some wonderful pastry and cappuccino or hot chocolate. For Lent, she decided to give up sweets. To avoid the shop and its temptations, she took an alternative route to work – which added 10 minutes to her commute each way. Then the state began to do road construction on her alternative route – which added another 10 minutes to her commute each way. She thought to herself, “Hmm, this needs some discernment. I’m going back to the original route – and I’ll take it as a sign from God that I’m supposed to stop and have pastry if there is a parking spot right in front of the shop.” *On the 8<sup>th</sup> time around the block*, a spot opened up! She knew that God wanted her to have pastry.

The Lenten terrain keeps changing. Last week, we entered the desert of temptation. This week, we scale a mountain of transfiguration. No one said the journey of faith would be easy. But neither were we warned that this level of athleticism would be required. Is the spiritual path really as challenging as the metaphors would make it seem? The answer is – hopefully. If we’re doing it right, we ought to be flexing some serious spiritual muscle. (adapted from PREPARE THE WORD, Feb 20, 2005)

First some background on the gospel. Mount Tabor, the traditional site of the Transfiguration, is one of those places that is not ‘on the way’ to anywhere. Mount Tabor is steep and rugged and hard to scale. The path that leads to the top of the mountain is hand-hewn out of rock. It is also narrow and dangerous and long. Then, at the top, with the exception of the view of the vast and unending plain of Jezreel below, there is nothing there. It’s an out-of-the-way place that has all the character of a dead-end – a beautiful dead-end, to be sure, but a dead-end nevertheless. And it is Tabor to which Jesus took Peter, James, and John. This story tells us a lot about what following Christ is all about, and all we have to do is look at Peter, James and John on Tabor.

In the first place, Peter, James, and John thought they had been called to go up the mountain to be with Jesus alone. So, the scripture says, they left the world below “and Jesus led them up a high mountain by themselves,” prepared, apparently to follow Jesus and find God.

Mountains in ancient spiritualities, Judaism included, were always points of contact with God because they were the places where earth touched heaven. To go ‘up to a high mountain’ – to which there are 8 major references in the Judeo-Christian scriptures – is always then to be seeking a very special relationship with God.

And on this particular excursion up this particular mountain, this is a very select group: no one else was with them and they had Jesus all to themselves. And, sure enough, scripture records that a strange and wonderful thing occurred there.

Up on the top of that faraway mountain, Peter, James, and John got a new insight into Jesus. Up there, by themselves, they began to see Jesus differently. And He was a great deal more than they had ever even imagined: He was as dazzling as the sun – He was as intense, and He was all-consumed as well as all-consuming. The idea was overwhelming. And very, very heady. It was also very, very disturbing.

Because then and there, in a gospel that is apparently about the mystical, the privatized dimension of life with Jesus, we begin to see the perennial struggle between piety and true Christianity, between comfort and compassion, between religion-for-real and religion-for-show. There, on the top of the mountain, right in

front of their eyes, Jesus, the scripture says, became transfigured before them, radiant as the sun and talking to Moses and Elijah....Moses and Elijah!

Second, that is the part of the story that makes all the difference in our discipleship. Why? If we understand that we were baptized as a call to service -- rather than fire insurance to save us from hell, then we have begun to get it. We see we are baptized to serve the wounded around us, and it's all there in 4 things about this gospel:

In the first place, Peter himself opted, like so many do, just for piety. "It's good for us to be here," Peter said. Peter knows a good thing when he sees it. And Peter plans to settle down then and there and become a church mouse. "Let's build three booths...." "Let's just go to church on Sundays because we like the jokes and the music and the church is pleasant and the folks are nice. But don't expect me to do anything. Oh no, I didn't sign up for that -- just came here to get my Jesus -- get my communion -- leave early and make a mad dash back to the car. Don't ask me to wear a name tag -- because God forbid -- someone might actually ask me to DO something about my baptism. No, I didn't come here for that. I'm a private person. It's all about me. Not about God. Don't bother me with all that service to the poor stuff. I'm getting my ticket into heaven. Me. Me. Me. "Let's build three booths...."

This is the biggest temptation in church -- it's playing church, dabbling in religion. Saying the words without really meaning them. Fulfilling an obligation and having no clue what the obligation is actually about. Not feeling any moral compulsion whatsoever to render any of this into flesh and blood. The poor are shiftless, and they're not my problem. I've got troubles of my own. And if Fr. John ever challenges me I'll pull out the card that I'm sure will shut him up -- "You're preaching politics!" But you may have noticed I have not shut up. Because Jesus didn't. The prophets didn't. And the Spirit won't let me shut up because God has something to say about every single aspect of our lives -- as individuals -- and as a community. Which means our political views -- and who we vote for and why -- are of great interest to God.

But then the second thing in this text. "While he was still speaking," the scripture says, "the voice of God says, 'This is my son.....Listen!'" And then, the passage continues, Jesus laid His hands on them and said, very simply, very directly: "Get up. And do not be afraid." I'll show you where to go. I'll tell you where to go. I'll show by my life's example what you are supposed to do. How you are supposed to act. Take care of those aliens and quit hiding behind unjust laws. You are responsible for your actions and you ARE your brother's and sister's keeper. You are to love as I have loved, to forgive as I have forgiven, and to be compassionate as I am compassionate.

Then, in the third scene of the story, slowly but surely, Jesus began to lead them around the edges of the cliffs, over the rocky road, back down the mountain to the very bottom of the hill: to the dirty towns and hurting people and scheming politicians and ineffective institutions below where the sick and outcast, the abandoned and infected are waiting for them -- and expecting them to heal them. And they had every right to expect it -- because Jesus didn't appear to Peter, James, and John with David, the king, or with Aaron, the priest.

Jesus didn't show Himself to the disciples with those who interpreted the law or defined the worship -- Jesus didn't reveal His work as either royalty or ritual. No! Jesus identified Himself on Tabor with Moses and Elijah. With Moses who rescued slaves from oppression, and with Elijah, whom King Ahab called 'that troubler of Israel,' the one who condemned the compromise between true and false gods; the one, in other words, who exposed to the people the underlying cause of their problems.

Jesus, the servant, identified Himself not with the kings and the priests of Israel who had maintained its establishments and developed its institutions, good as they were. No, Jesus, the healer, identified Himself with the prophets, with those who had been sent to warn Israel of its unconscionable abandonment of the covenant, its lack of concern for the poor. There is a great deal of pain and power in this gospel. Because this gospel is one of the bedrock lessons of baptism. Notice that the same thing was said to Jesus at His baptism is said to Him at His transfiguration. "You are my beloved one..." If baptism is to have any meaning whatsoever in our times, then every baptized person, too, will have to wade into the throngs of hurting people on every plain of this planet, listening, listening, listening to the prophet-healer Jesus and exposing to people the underlying causes of all the wounding in this world. And all of that in the face of those institution-types for whom saving the system is much too often a higher priority than saving the people.

Of course, the call to baptism presupposes a long, long journey up a mountain to find God. But the call to baptism also means we simply cannot build a spiritual life and expect to stay on the top of our pious and antiseptic little mountains. The call of the spiritual life, then, the call of baptism, is the call to take all the insights into the life of Christ that we have ever been able to gather -- down from our private little mountains to the grasping, groaning world of our own time. The call of baptism today is the call to be aware of the root causes of suffering in this world and to work a few miracles of our own. (freely adapted from Joan Chittister, *IN THE HEART OF THE TEMPLE*, pages not cited)

A true story to conclude. Jesuit Fr. Gregory Boyle, in *TATOOS OF THE HEART*, his book about working with HOMEBOY INDUSTRIES with the gangs and addicted in Los Angeles, tells the story. It shows the deep connection between the Transfiguration and our true baptismal identity. He writes:

"At 3:00 in the morning, the phone rings. It's Cesar. He says what every homie (*a homie is someone who has been through the program at HOMEBOY INDUSTRIES*) when they call in the middle of the night, "Did I wake you?"

I always think, *Why no, I was just waiting and hoping that you'd call and disturb my sleep.*

Cesar is sober, and it's urgent that he talk to me.

"I gotta ask you a question. You know how I've always seen you as my father -- ever since I was a little Kid? Well, I hafta ask you a question."

Now Cesar pauses, and the gravity of it all makes his voice waver and crumble, 'Have I....been....your son?'

'Of course,' I say.

'Whew,' Cesar exhales, 'I thought so.'

And his voice becomes enmeshed in a cadence of gentle sobbing. 'Then....I will be....your son. And you....will be my father. And nothing will ever separate us, right?'

'That's right.'

In this early morning call Cesar did not discover that he has a father. He discovered that he is a son worth having. The voice broke through the clouds of his terror and the crippling mess of his own history, and he felt himself beloved. God, wonderfully pleased in him, is where God wanted Cesar to reside." (p. 31, slightly adapted) Us too. Amen.