

A Catholic priest was working in the inner city. He was walking down an alley one evening on his way home when a young man came down behind him and poked a knife against his back. "Give me your money," the young man said. The priest opened his jacket and reached into an inner pocket to remove his wallet, exposing his clerical collar. "Oh, I'm sorry, Father," said the young man, "I didn't see your collar. I don't want YOUR money." Trembling from the scare, the priest removed a cigar from his shirt pocket and offered it to the young man. "Here," he said. "Have a cigar." "Oh, no, I can't do that," the young man replied, "I gave up smoking for Lent."

Let's dig into this fabulous gospel text. The context of the Transfiguration is substantially the same in each of the synoptic Gospels – Matthew, Mark & Luke. It primarily concerns Jesus' teaching about WHO HE IS – the beloved son of God who suffers and dies for us sinners -- and WHO THE DISCIPLES ARE TO BE – beloved children of God, also called to pick up a cross and die to self. While our passage from Matthew contains some dialogue, the passage primarily describes an event and a specific location, which together serve to validate and develop the earlier conversation Jesus had with His disciples at Caesarea Philippi (16:24-26), where Jesus asked the disciples who the people think He is – and who the disciples think He is, and Peter says "You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God." And this was followed immediately by Jesus' prediction of His passion and death. Putting the 2 realities – Christ and cross together – is the message.

The timing of the event serves to make this clear. We are told that this takes place AFTER SIX DAYS. The differing number of days in the synoptics (6 and 8) suggests that the number is at least partially symbolic: the number in Matthew and Mark is 6, pointing to the event as an anticipation of Jesus' ability to lead His followers into a new and perfect 7th day: the true or ultimate sabbath. This references Matthew 11:28: "Come to me, all you who are weary and find life burdensome, and I will refresh you....you will find REST...."

The help in understanding WHO JESUS IS -- is developed both by the location of the event on a mountain, and by the appearance of 2 great prophets, Moses and Elijah, who also share their own mountain experiences.

Interestingly, in Matthew all mountains are un-named except for the Mount of Olives – and are places where WHO JESUS IS – is revealed. So Matthew tells us of the mountain of temptation (4:8) – showing us that Jesus does not live on bread alone; of teaching where He delivers the Sermon on the Mount – He goes UP the mountain, as Moses did – He is the NEW Moses (5:1); the mountain of prayer – He goes up to spend the night in communion with His Father (14:23); the mountain of healing (15:29) – He heals 'all the people bring to Him;' the Mount of Olives, which reveals One who is God – and also full of human anguish and faithfulness as He struggles in the Garden of Gethsemane (26:30); and the mountain of final instruction (28:16 – the great commission to go and make disciples of all nations). Our passage, however, draws attention not only to Matthew's mountains, but to 2 Old Testament mountains: Sinai/Horeb and Moriah.

For Mt Sinai/Horeb – we hear of Moses, also 'after 6 days,' his face transformed, speaking with God on a mountain, a tent, 3 assistants with Moses, and a cloud. All these draw our attention to Mt Sinai and invite a comparison of Jesus with Moses. God's permission for Moses to approach Sinai, and Moses' transfiguration there (Ex 24:1; & 34:29-35), validates him as a bearer of divine revelation. Moses' receiving – and subsequent sharing – of revelation takes place not only on the mountain, but at the foot of the mountain in a tent (the tent of meeting). As Moses entered that tent, a pillar of cloud, representing the presence of God, descended on it, and there God spoke to Moses. Peter's desire to provide 3 tents, then, would seem to indicate his

understanding of Jesus as one who, with Elijah, is on the same level as Moses: a prophet who is able to live in God's presence and to receive – and impart – revelation from God.

Elijah also had experienced the presence and revelation of God on Mt Horeb/Sinai. For Elijah, this moment was one in which he expressed his perception that he ALONE has remained faithful to God (which God declares to be a false perception –see 1 Kgs 19:14, 18). The question as to who really does stand ALONE is addressed by Matthew. That is, Peter's understanding, which at first seems impressive, that Jesus stands alongside Moses (each equally worthy of a tent) is quickly dispelled. Not only does the voice of God single out Jesus as the only one to whom to listen, but Matthew further emphasizes this uniqueness by the sudden disappearance of Moses and Elijah, leaving Jesus ALONE, in a category of one.

So on this mountain of transfiguration, then, Peter's confused understanding of 'who Jesus is,' seemingly so clear 6 days prior when He said that Jesus was the Son of God, but immediately confused with the prediction of suffering and death – indicates that their understanding of WHO JESUS IS will not be complete until Jesus' story is itself completed by His death and resurrection.

And the Mt Moriah strand adds another use of the voice of God – where God repeats 3 times words to Abraham about the sacrifice of His son Isaac – “your son, your only son, your beloved son” (Gen 22:2, 12, 16) Which prefigures the understanding that Jesus, God's beloved and only son will suffer and die, and this will not be outside God's purposes. (all of this taken from David Renwick, LECTONARY HOMILETICS, Feb-Mar 2008, pages not listed)

OK, I know that was a lot, but it's full of stuff that is important for us to understand where we fit into this story – and what it means for us today. So second, was this a literal revelation of divine glory in history, or a fantastic moment of personal insight? Why not both? And in addition to that, a third thing: a way of seeing and hearing as available to us today as it was that day to them? Do we have to go up a mountain to apprehend God's glory? It's a great place to do it. But so is a forest, an ocean, a natural wonder, or any beautiful sight. I think a Transfiguration is waiting for some of us in front of a great painting, in the midst of a paragraph, in a conversation with a good friend, or even on a street corner between one thought and the next. Suddenly, what we imagined was a given becomes merely an option, a choice, one of many. In an instant, we go from thinking a relationship is doomed to seeing how it can be saved. After a season of doubt, faith grips us like a certainty. From the depths of boredom or depression, we see the cloud open and a ray of hopeful light pierce our darkness. Transfiguration, it would seem, is there for those with eyes to see it. (adapted from PREPARE THE WORD, Feb 17, 2008, p. 2-3)

Madeleine L'Engle, in her book THE IRRATIONAL SEASON, writes this about the Transfiguration: “Suddenly they saw Him the way He was, the way He really was all the time,/ although they had never seen it before,/ the glory which blinds the everyday eye and so becomes invisible./ This is how He was, radiant, brilliant, carrying joy like a flaming sun in His hands./ This is the way He was – is from the beginning, and we cannot bear it./ So He manned Himself, came manifest to us;/ and there on the mountain they saw Him, really saw Him, saw His light./ We all know that if we really see Him we die./ But isn't that what is required of us?/ Then, perhaps, we will see each other too.” (THE IRRATIONAL SEASON, Seabury Press, 1977)

L'Engle gets what's going on in this story. It is not only a transfiguration of Christ but also, and perhaps more importantly for us, a transfiguration of the disciples. Because once they have seen Him as He really is, in all His glory, nothing can ever be quite the same again. And it's natural for Peter to want to somehow preserve this mountaintop experience, this spiritual high. To freeze the moment, and have everything be this wonderful from now on.

We've probably all wanted to do this with the highpoints of our life. Whether it is a spiritual high, like a conversion experience, our wedding day, birth of a child, a game-winning goal, basket, or touchdown, graduation, a starring role, an award and recognition for our work. At times like that it seems as if everything in the world has fallen into place. "God's in His heaven; all's right with the world." And we wish we could STAY in that moment forever and ever, amen. But it doesn't happen that way. And it seems like the harder we try to preserve these wonderful moments, the faster they slip away from us.

We all have to come back down the mountain, into the valley, where real life happens most of the time. Because Jesus came into our real, ordinary, everyday life. And those mountaintop moments are a rare gift, often given to sustain us and encourage us through the tough times. We have something wonderful to recall when life isn't so wonderful at all. (adapted from Julie Adkins in LECTONARY HOMILETICS, Feb-Mar 2011, p. 44)

A story to conclude. In 1955, Endre and Ilona Marton were journalists in their native Hungary. Their reporting provided the rest of the world with the real story of a country brutalized by the Hungarian Stalinist state. Over time, the Hungarian secret police closed in on the Martons and arrested them. But the couple managed to survive more than a year of harsh imprisonment and a humiliating show trial for espionage, and eventually escaped to a new life in the United States.

Endre and Ilona's daughter Kati Marton is an award-winning journalist in her own right. With access to the thousands of pages of secret files the state police had collected on her parents, Kati Marton reconstructed her parents' story in the book ENEMIES OF THE PEOPLE: MY FAMILY'S JOURNEY TO AMERICA.

In these now-open secret files, Kati rediscovered her parent's courageous stand against the Communist thugs and their uncompromising fight for human rights and justice. Kati wrote that neighbors, colleagues, supposed friends – even the girls' nanny – informed on and betrayed her mother and father. She recounts the risks they took to file stories for Associated Press and how her parents' marriage began to crack under the pressure.

But after their arrests, Endre and Ilona found new strength to support one another and keep their family together. Kati also reads, for the first time, in her reticent father's own words, his love for his wife, Kati and her sister Juli, and his readiness to sacrifice his life in order to save them from Communist brutality. Kati, who was only a child at the time, realizes how the experience especially transformed her mother. She writes:

"Papa's arrest transformed Mama. I had never seen her as determined as she was during the 4 months between his arrest and her own. Perhaps because she had lost her primary audience, my father, she lost her dramatic personality. She had 2 small children who were now utterly dependent on her alone – and a very shaky sense of her own future. Vanished was the self-indulgence I associated with her.....Now she focused all her energy on saving him and protecting us. Her entire life until that moment – a life of loss and survival – had prepared her for this."

Ilona ignored her husband's advice to divorce him and leave Hungary; instead, she continued his dangerous work of filing news stories for Associated Press and fighting for his freedom. Kati writes: "Prison had strengthened my parents' marriage....It was something they had shared and survived, as they shared and survived the nightmare of the Nazi occupation. They were welded together by loss, confinement, war, jail, and finally, love."

This is a story of transfiguration – how forgiveness, justice and love can be the vehicles for transforming one's life in the midst of despair, hatred and vengeance. The figure of Christ on Mount Tabor

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calls us to the Lenten work of transfiguration – to transform the crosses laid on our shoulder into the compassion and hope of Easter resurrection. Archbishop Desmond Tutu said that “God places us in the world as His fellow workers – agents of transfiguration. We work with God so that injustice is transfigured into justice, so that there will be more compassion and caring, so that there will be more laughter and joy, so that there will be more togetherness in God’s world.”

The weeks ahead call us to descend the mountain with the ‘transfigured’ Jesus and to take up our crosses – be they physical, emotional, addictive, economic, or intellectual – and realize the sacred goodness and value we possess that enables us to bring the glory of Easter into our lives and the lives of those around us. Amen (story adapted from CONNECTIONS, Lent, Cycle C, Feb 2010, p 2)

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