

A wife yelled from upstairs to her husband downstairs and asked, “Do you ever get a shooting pain across your body, like someone’s got a voodoo doll of you and they’re stabbing it?” He replied, “No.” She responded: “How about now?”

OK, down to business. In his book on the nature of religion, Mircea Eliade points out that the image of a sacred mountain is central to many religions. The top of the mountain seems to be touching the heavens, suggesting that it ‘links heaven and earth.’ The sacred mountain – the mountain on which the holy has been or is manifested – becomes the axis mundi, the center of the world, for the believer. It is “the point of focus, an ordering principle,” as Mount Sinai was for the Israelites, and Tabor to Peter, James, and John. (THE SACRED AND THE PROFANE, p. 38-42)

Was the Transfiguration a huge celestial prop arranged to wise up the feckless followers of Christ? Or is it a literary prop used by the evangelists to wise up future gospel readers? Some scripture scholars consider the Transfiguration a post-Resurrection account of a revelation that has been inserted into the earlier story, much like we celebrate Gaudete and Laetare Sundays embedded in Advent and Lent as reminders that something good is on its way. A hallmark of Christian theology is the idea that what WAS, is NOW – and what WILL BE is also remarkably at hand. The past and the future are simply 2 expressions of the ‘eternal now’ of the kingdom of God. So the coming kingdom has already arrived.

This means that identifying the precise historical moment when Jesus was revealed physically and audibly as the divine Son is interesting -- but beside the point. More to the heart of the matter: Do WE see Jesus as the Christ of God? Can we look at the once-and-future Jesus – in the manger, on the cross, and every step in between – as the revelation of God’s love for us?

Visions and trances and apparitions give certain privileged glimpses into the divine realm that garner a lot of attention for their startling supernatural qualities. But they are all ways of saying, “Wake up! See the divine presence and activity all around you right now!” It was certainly true that the transfigured dazzling Jesus of that hour on the mountain, book-ended by prophets, was the same Jesus who walked and talked with His friends for 3 years. This same radiant Jesus went to His crucifixion, rose on Easter Sunday, lives in His church, and comes to us in our daily lives in word, sacrament, and the least of our sisters and brothers. Can we receive the holy presence with understanding in all of these forms? Or are we still looking for a mountaintop view, special lighting, and a little fire?

Of course, our modern understanding of religion is not so primitive. And, of course, on some level, it still is. We still instinctively look up and out for signs of God’s presence when we might just as well look within, or right in front of us. We are willing to genuflect in church-- but we don’t take off our shoes before the ongoing radiant presence of God all around us. (PREPARE THE WORD, March 7, 2004) So we see how rich this story is on so many levels.

Second, we can only enter the mystery of Transfiguration through prayer. We have to go to the mountain, to God. Only in prayer, can we hear the Voice that says: “You are my beloved.” Only in prayer can we have the silence and the quiet to know that God is with us in all of our moments, especially the ones when we feel like we are most abandoned by Him. The reality is that those who choose not to live with a relationship to Christ rarely live out a life of adventure; they live venial-ventures. A venial venture is life as a small existence. One lives on a little treadmill: getting up and going to work, coming home and going to bed; getting up and going to work – an endless cycle.

If we don't want our life to be a venial venture, we will have to create the time and the space to go to the mountain. To find out who God is – and who we are as His beloved sons and daughters. Prayer will remind us why we are here -- to love and to be loved – to serve and not be served -- and that everything else is just fluff. Knowing whose we are and who we are allows us to live a life of meaning, purpose and passion. A big life, a transfigured life, a life truly worth living. In short, a life like Christ. Prayer is the sacred mountain available to all who find time for it. (adapted freely from THE LENTEN LABYRINTH, Edward Hays, p. 35)

Third, what transfiguration looks like. You're in the yard on a beautiful sunlit day pulling dandelions, and suddenly you are awestruck by the amazing yellow of its color and the intricacy of the design and even the strange beauty of the smell – and the dandelion is transfigured. You know it's not an ugly yellow weed, but a little bit of the wonder and glory of God.

You give your child away in marriage, and suddenly you no longer see the messy rooms and the late worried nights, or hear the shouts of anger. You realize that in your life you have known something of the divine love - -that intense, irrational love which nothing can finally shut out. And your child is transfigured in your eyes, so completely that you'll never see that child as you once did.

We go to church for years, hearing the same stories and hymns, and our spirits become sleepy and dull. But one Sunday morning it happens. Maybe in the words of the psalm, or the Lord's Prayer, or in the words or melody of a hymn that's been sung a million times – maybe – just maybe – even in a line from a homily (NAH, that never happens!) -- all of a sudden the dullness breaks away if only for an instant, and even our faith is transfigured. We know the joy and peace of a fulfilled faith and life.

The moment may even come too late. A couple might live out their years together in nothing more than a state of truce, no longer wanting or expecting anything from the other. But when death comes to one, that one can become transfigured in the eyes of the surviving one. Then the times of sacrifice and giving, the evidences of character and courage, are seen and appreciated as they never were when that person lived. How different their lives would have been if they had allowed that moment of transfiguration to break through earlier.

Always there is mystery in the air, which the Gospel writers never let us forget. On that mountain of Transfiguration, the awesome power of God is revealed in the person of Jesus Christ. There, in the presence of Peter, James, and John, truly, there was mystery in the air as Jesus was transfigured. That mystery is still present, as well as past and future. And calls us to experience this gift with the Christ. Listen to Him. (SUNDAY SERMONS, July-August 2006, pages not cited)