

The Last Sunday after the Epiphany, 6 March 2011
Saint James Episcopal Church, Tigard OR
The Rev'd Raggs Ragan, Rector

Alleluia! How many times have you said this or heard others say it in the ordinary course of life – as a simple expression of delight? It is often used to express surprise and joy, usually when something unexpected happens. It is a lovely word, a very singable word. It is our version of the Hebrew for “Praise the Lord!”

When we ring our bells to each Alleluia as we do on this and other special days, we are joining in the delight, giving further expression to the spontaneous joy.

At the heart of transfiguration is this joy. Jesus went up the mountain for solitude and prayer, to ready himself for Jerusalem, rejection, and death. He took his closest friends with him. This was undoubtedly a comfort for him as well as a time of enlightenment for them.

Consider what happens:

Jesus, Peter, James, and John go up the mountain together, away from the crowds with their needs and demands. The disciples might have expected some special teaching, or just some rest. They surely felt privileged to have this private time with the One they all followed. And suddenly they see Jesus differently. Matthew says this is just six days after Peter made his ecstatic proclamation, “You are the Christ, the son of the Living God!” Now he and the sons of Zebedee see that reality.

Jesus is not different. It is their perception that changes. They are seeing a stunning, transcendent reality right through the veil of the ordinary. All the dustiness disappears. All their own fretting and self-seeking is washed away. It is as if they had climbed the mountain into John the Divine’s vision of the Heavenly Jerusalem. Others might say they were dreaming or hallucinating – but we know that the shining glorious Jesus they see in that moment, the one freely conversing with Elijah and Moses, is the real Christ, who has always been there with them, under the dust.

Peter, James, and John see this stunning vision and Peter wants to hang onto it. So he makes another of his outbursts: he volunteers to build shelters for Jesus, Moses, and Elijah. He wants to hang onto the moment. He does not want the dust back; he does not want the crowd back; he certainly does not want to proceed to Jerusalem and Jesus’ death. “Let’s just stay here and bask in the glory by ourselves.”

Then the transfiguration experience goes a step further: they see a bright cloud, such as the one that brought the presence of God through the Exodus time in the wilderness, and this bright cloud doesn’t descend on the Temple, or the top of the mountain, or even just on Jesus. It comes right over all of them. They are overshadowed by the glory of God – and they hear a voice “This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!”

Six days before Peter had acclaimed Jesus, now it is the voice of God.

This is certainly a wonderful, joyful experience, but at the same time overwhelming – so they collapse in fear. Then Jesus comes and touches them gently, assuring them there is nothing to fear. When they look up, the cloud is gone, as are Moses and Elijah. Only Jesus is there, dusty and normal. But they have seen him in all his glory and that vision has permanently changed how they see him.

To quote Rob Voyle, “Nothing is changed, but everything is different. There has been a shift in consciousness that leads to new life and possibilities.”

We are on the mountain with Peter, full of enthusiasm at the glimpse of Jesus transfigured. As Peter says, ‘Lord, it is good to be here.’ Good to be here with the bells and the alleluias and all the glorious music. But we cannot build dwellings here, any more than Peter could. These experiences are given to us to provide us with the strength and hope we will need for the work God intends for us to do on his behalf, to sustain us through the long journeys of our lives, particularly the wilderness times of danger and fear and confusion and searching.

Although we recognize mountaintop experiences as special, as something to treasure, the fullness of their meaning emerges only over time. That is why we hold them close and hark back to them often, to see how they, or our understanding of them, have grown. Dame Julian’s visions of Christ Crucified took place over a short span of days, but it took her many years of thought and prayer to unpack their full meaning, to understand what God was showing her and to write out those understandings in order to pass that gift along to future generations of Christians seeking a deeper understanding of God in Christ. We must be patient with ourselves and with our revelations, be willing to let their gift to us unfold slowly as we grow in Christ.

Peter and James and John saw the divinity of Jesus shining through his dusty clothing. They saw his intimate connection with the great gifts of God in Israel’s past from the Exodus onward. They wanted to linger and savor the wonder, perhaps never return to the ordinary run of life, to the frightening future of Jesus’ confrontations with worldly power. But they could not make the experience last. They could only hold it in their hearts, where they could take it out and examine it, draw strength from it when they had need.

It is the same with us. We cannot be always in the Alleluia moments. Then let us go bravely forth into the wilderness of Lent. Let us return on Wednesday truly ready to undertake a journey into the heart of God, to make ourselves worthy to live again the sacred days of Jesus’ suffering, death and resurrection. In the next few days, let us consider what sort of wilderness journey this will be for us this year.

Is my life so full of clutter and busy-ness, that I cannot hear the voice of God? Then let me take special care to cultivate the silence of the wilderness, let me shut out the din and hear the still small voice.

Is my life ruled by fear and anxiety? Perhaps my discipline should include extra time for prayer

and reading scriptures.

Am I overwhelmed by worry about my needs, my future? Perhaps my discipline needs to focus on serving others, on meeting the needs of the poor around us.

Am I already in a wilderness of loneliness, cut off from any sense of God's loving presence? Do I feel lost and alone, adrift and without direction? Then let me cultivate times of contemplation and reflection.

Whatever our sense of the wilderness, whether we fear it or go forth eagerly, let us come to worship, and to prayer or study gatherings, where we can know ourselves to be sharing this journey with other people of faith, similarly drawn to God.

Lent is a wonderful time, a time to consider the shape of our lives, to see what space we have made for God, to clear away whatever is not helpful to our life journey toward God. A time to gather to ourselves whatever practices or ideas or experiences will further that growth and journey.

Today is a day to remind ourselves of all the epiphanies, all the transfiguration moments which have been granted to us, which give us strength and hope. And, in the words of the Epistle, we 'will do well to be attentive to this as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in [our] hearts.' Amen.

We immerse ourselves in these moments and treasure our memories of them, because, rather than rendering our ordinary lives the more dreary by contrast, they reflect glory into them, even as God's glory was reflected in the face of Moses. It is here in the world created by God, among creatures loved by God, that we will find God's face, and so this is indeed a wonderful world and a life filled with the potential for glory.

This week's *Journey with Jesus* includes mention of a delightful poem by Christian Wiman recounting a moment early in his awakening to the spiritual world when he saw a tree transfigured. He was staring at a bare, leafless tree when suddenly it seemed to burst forth with leaves and rise glorious into the sky. He knows that what he saw was a flock of birds taking flight from the bare branches, but he felt that he was seeing the spirit of the tree, the divine life expressing itself in the tree – seeing through the mask of death to the reality of life.

With our eyes and hearts opened by these alleluia glimpses of God, we see through grief to joy, through suffering to the transcendent, through the ordinary to the holy.

Moments of transfiguration sustain us. These moments, whether they occur in the course of our daily lives, or while we are at prayer, or as a result of someone else's experience told or portrayed in art, temporarily rip the veil, smash the mirror, and remind us of what is truly real. And we cry Alleluia!

A Prayer for Transfiguration Sunday by the Rev'd Dr. William Loader

Let's go up the mountain.
Let's go up to the place where the land meets the sky
where the earth touches the heavens,
to the place of meeting,
to the place of mists,
to the place of voices and conversations,
to the place of listening.

O God,
We open our eyes and we see Jesus,
the months of ministry transfigured to a beam of light,
the light of the world, your light.
May your light shine upon us.

We open our eyes and we see Moses and Elijah,
your word restoring us, showing us the way,
telling a story,
your story, his story, our story.
May your word speak to us.

We open our eyes and we see mist,
the cloud of your presence
which assures us of all we do not know
and that we do not need to fear that.
Teach us to trust.

We open our eyes and we see Peter's constructions,
his best plans, our best plans,
our missing the point,
our missing the way.
Forgive our foolishness and sin

We open our eyes and we see Jesus,
not casting us off,
but leading us down, leading us out –
to ministry, to people.
Your love endures forever.

We open our ears and we hear your voice,
'This is my beloved Son, listen to him!'
And we give you thanks. Amen. Alleluia!