A Sermon for DaySpring

By Eric Howell

*Ordinary Things on Holy Ground*

Transfiguration Sunday

Matthew 17.1-9

February 23, 2020

I think it’s fair to say that most people most of the time do not experience anything in their lives like what’s going on in the transfiguration.

In the transfiguration, Jesus Christ is visibly, majestically, mysteriously changed before the saucer-sized eyes of the disciples. They no longer see Jesus in human flesh and blood which, frankly, would be good enough for most of us who have spent our lives as those who believe without seeing. The disciples see something even more, they see light not just shining on him but shining from within him. His face shown like the sun. His clothes gleam, dazzling bright white.

What’s going on here? The infinite qualitative distinction between time and eternity, man and God, creature and creation, God’s imminence and transcendence collapses before their eyes in Jesus Christ. The yawing gap between God and human is closed in an instant. They are in the undeniable, unquenchable presence of God. They fall to the ground and hide their faces, lest they see God and die.

Most people most of the time do not experience God like that. Neither did they. They didn’t experience God like that either most of the time. Because of that, because they didn’t always see what humans can’t always see, the disciples were at a critical juncture in their discipleship. Jesus had told them that the path he was taking would lead to Jerusalem, to arrest, crucifixion, and death. The path ahead would be a way of suffering, he said. The disciples as a group, and Peter as their spokesman, did not care for this very much and told him so. To which Jesus responds, “Thank you for your input. You are a valuable member of the team, and I value your perspective. Let us find a mediating middle ground between our somewhat different visions for the Messiah.”

No, he said nothing of the sort. “Get behind me Satan. You are not setting your mind on the things of God but the things of man.” That’s what he said. That had to sting. And Jesus wasn’t done yet. He said, “If you will follow me, you must take up your cross and follow me.”

For many people that is much more their experience of knowing Jesus far more than a mystical transfiguration experience. Throughout history and in our own time, Christians have suffered for their faith in all kinds of terrible ways. That’s not to say Christians haven’t done our own bad things, we have for sure, but Christians have also suffered from the first generation to parts of the world today. So many times, the courage and conviction and grace with which Christians have received their suffering and even martyrdom is the most humbling witness of faith, especially compared with much of our petty complaints about inconveniences and slights.

For many Christians, discipleship is a way of suffering in the valley of death not glory on the mount of transfiguration. But for many more discipleship isn’t even dramatic at all—no mountain, no valley. It’s just the daily grind of life lived with little imagination left of knowing God intimately. God for the most part, most of the time, seems silent, distant, removed, or, at best, hovering somewhere in the background of life’s ebbs and flows. Jesus promised, “I am with you always to the end of the age,” but where? Where is he? We long to know, we long to know him in the full-hearted intimacy of knowing. Even more we long to be, if not to know, to be in the presence of God.

What would you give for 20 minutes in your life of raw, unfiltered, unmediated, undeniable encounter with Jesus Christ? What would it look like, and where would it be?

I tend to hunt for Christ in beautiful places in nature and in churches. I do love old churches. This past summer we were again at St. Peter’s in Rome, built to be the most magnificent church in the world, and it is. It is so big and so grand; it’s not designed to witness to the gentleness of Jesus. It is built to testify to the power of God and the majesty of the king of kings. The rotunda is so big and so high, the statue of liberty could be placed there with ease. She could climb a tall ladder, stand on her tip toes, reach her flame as high as she can, and she still would not come close to the top. The candlesticks are human sized; the chairs are overstuffed. Being in that room is like you’re jack who’s climbed the beanstalk through the clouds into a giant’s oversized abode.

Churches can be magnificent, whether large or small, elaborate or simple. Yet, we remember even at their grandest, they are just shelters in stone and wood and brick of just the sort Peter proposed to build for Jesus on the mountaintop. “It’s good for us be here, let us build shelters for you.” Peter wants to build tabernacles for Jesus, but Jesus’ flesh is the tabernacle of God’s presence. (Hauerwas, *Matthew,* 157). Churches are recognitions in stone and wood and brick, of spiritual awakenings (Margaret Visser) but Jesus flesh, transfigured, pierced, his flesh is the tabernacle of God’s presence. Not even our most glorious churches can replace a raw, unfiltered encounter with Jesus if such a thing were even possible.

Sometimes, in just a glimpse or a moment, it seems like it is possible, or at least it’s as possible as it can be. For some people, music gets you about as close to God as anything else. The first few notes from an old hymn tune from your childhood are played, and the memories flood back: of someone who stood in the kitchen humming that same tune years ago, of innocence and purity. For a moment, it all comes back.

For other people, sometimes, God is found in the natural world. It’s there where we feel like we are getting back in touch with something deeply true about our being and our createdness. On the top of a mountain surveying the valleys below, at the edge of the ocean, aware of our smallness. Beauty. I think some scientists would say human organisms don’t need beauty, but I doubt those scientists have ever met a real human person. We need beauty wherever we can find it. Beauty is essential and transcendental. It’s where the doorway to God swings open.

You might travel around the world to sit for 20 minutes in a beautiful cathedral, or walk a dozen miles to find a beautiful place in nature, or dream of just 20 minutes to teleport back to a moment in life with your children as babies, or your parents still alive.

What would you give for 20 minutes of raw, unmediated, encounter with Jesus?

Irish poet WB Yeats wrote a poem about this sort of mystical experience, the kind that cuts through the complexities, confusions, and just the fog of daily life. *Vacillation* is a long, complex poem from the perspective of a person in their middle ages carrying around the sandbags of regrets and shames and worries that life tends to stack on our shoulders. In the middle of complex dialogues between heart and soul in a tangle of intellectual and philosophical themes, comes bursting like sunlight into the poem a simple stanza about a simple moment in a London coffee shop.

*My fiftieth year had come and gone,  
I sat, a solitary man,  
In a crowded London shop,  
An open book and empty cup  
On the marble table-top.  
While on the shop and street I gazed  
My body of a sudden blazed;  
And twenty minutes more or less  
It seemed, so great my happiness,  
That I was blessed and could bless.*

This is describing the gift of Awakening, the glory of God in a person fully awake, fully alive, even for just 20 minutes. Out of the alienation, guilt and shame, out of being alone or feeling alone, the poet in this most ordinary setting experiences ‘so great a happiness that I was blessed and could bless.” He describes it in transfiguration terms: “my body of a sudden blazed.”

As we come to the communion table, here especially we are reminded that it is in the ordinary things that we come as close to transfiguration as we are allowed. If we spend our lives hunting just for the mountaintop, we will miss Christ, who is already all around. We will miss the places where the door swings open. Ordinary things—like bread and wine—are where God shines through, and we are blessed and can bless.

Ordinary things all around are like holy ground:

like putting your hands in the dirt and sinking them deep, and neighbors, the laughter of children, and the wisdom of gray hair,

ordinary things—pausing long enough to watch a sunset once in a while, a favorite psalm that speaks in a new way,

ordinary things--an old hymn or a new chorus sung in harmony, ashes on a forehead in the shape of a cross, a small act of kindness for someone lonely and hurting,

ordinary things--like silence, breathing, sabbath morning.

It’s in those things that we meet God, not every time, but sometimes. Oh, sometimes, it feels like we blaze, awake, alive, loved, blessed.

We do not yet see the fulfilment of the newness of creation in Christ, but we taste the first fruits. We do not see that the world has been set straight. We still have no proof that it is right. As it is, we do not see everything in subjection to him. But we do see Jesus. By God, sometimes we do see Jesus. Hold on to those moments, bread pressed in the flesh of your palm, the taste of the wine on your tongue, the sound of Amen in your heart, thanks be to God on your lips, the awareness penetrating your soul, you are beloved.

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