

“THIN PLACES”  
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February 11, 2018

Transfiguration Sunday

2 Kings 2:1-12

Mark 9:2-9

Right now I am in the midst of reading ordination papers. I sit on our conference’s Board of Ordained Ministry, and every year at this time, candidates for ministry come before the board to be examined, if you will, as to their fitness for ministry. Each one of them prepares a paper, answering theological and disciplinary questions, designing a Bible study, and finally, writing and delivering a sermon. Those papers usually come out to about fifty pages each, and this year, there are fourteen candidates, so I’m doing a lot of reading these days.

And as I read, especially the sermons of these relatively new preachers, I am reminded yet again how difficult preaching can be. It takes a lot of hard work to do it well, and even then, well, sometimes, sermons don’t turn out so well.

It’s not easy to preach, and I’ll tell you one of the reasons why. Sometimes the text you’re going to preach about is easy to understand and straightforward - a breeze. The sermon practically writes itself. Say, for instance, you’re preaching on one of the “lost” parables in Luke – the lost coin, the lost sheep, the lost or Prodigal Son. It’s not too hard to preach on those, because the point is crystal clear. God seeks the lost, will stop at nothing to find the lost, and welcomes the lost home with open arms – even us.

But then, there are other scripture passages that are not so easy to preach on, like, for instance, today’s – the Gospel lesson about the transfiguration of Jesus. They’re more mysterious, dealing with the mysteries of faith. Like transfiguration. Transfiguration – not a word we hear a lot these days. It rather sounds like something out of a Star Wars movie, doesn’t it? All this talk about blinding light, brilliant clothing, clouds and the voice of God. It’s hard to wrap your mind around it and make sense of it because it is so mysterious. Harder still to try to put words to what it might mean in your life and mine.

So today is one of those tough sermons. Earlier this week, when I was wrestling with how to preach this lesson and despairing a bit about how to go about it, God gave me a gift – a glimpse into what transfiguration is, and it came, oddly enough, through the television.

I happen to be a fan of the TV show “Today with Kathie Lee Gifford and Hoda Kotb.” I just like it. It’s light and chatty, and a while ago I started DVRing it so that I could watch it in the evening. I know a lot of you know who Kathie Lee Gifford is because she’s been around a long time, but maybe you don’t know as much about Hoda. She’s also been around a while, and was recently named the new co-anchor of the regular Today Show. She’s been a successful television personality for many years now, and seemed to have it all together.

But one thing was missing. She had always wanted to be a mother, but for one reason or another it never happened – either because of her career path, or personal relationships, or health issues – and truth be told, she had pretty much reconciled herself to the fact that it would never happen. Until last year, when one day she surprised everyone by adopting an adorable baby girl.

She named her Haley Joy – Haley after the comet which streaks through the sky and illuminates everything - and joy, well, for obvious reasons. Anyway, now life has completely changed for Hoda. Even though she’s at the pinnacle of her broadcasting career and that matters to her, still she has come to realize that what really matters most of all is her Haley. She delights in all of the adventures of her little girl and it puts everything else in life into perspective for her.

Now, to the moment that spoke to me of transfiguration. Hoda said one day this week that when she got home from work she went to the nursery to see Haley just like always, picked her up, hugged and kissed her, and carried her down the hall to her bedroom. She laid Haley down and then leaned over to get closer to her, and then Hoda said, she and her precious baby girl, still under a year old, just locked eyes and stared at each other. Like they were looking into each other’s souls. Hoda said it went on for the longest time, and it was so profound, so moving that she started to cry – and when she did, Hoda said Haley started to try to kiss her to make it better.

That, my friends, is what I would call a “thin place.” A thin place is a phrase the Irish use to describe those moments, those transcendent moments, when, as one pastor put it, “the veil between this world and the next is so sheer that it is easy to step through.” (Barbara Brown Taylor, “Thin Places,” *Home By Another Way*, p. 59) It’s a moment when you know that you know that you know – and that you are known through and through.

It’s that kind of moment that happened on the Mount of Transfiguration that day with Jesus and his disciples. A moment in time that took their breath away – a moment when the veil between this world and the next was so sheer it was easy to step through.

It started out as an ordinary-enough day. Peter, James and John were with Jesus and he came up and asked them to take a walk with him. Nothing out of the ordinary there. But when they got to the top of the mountain, everything changed, in the blink of an eye. You heard the incredible story.

All of a sudden Jesus' clothes became dazzling white, and then, standing beside him were Moses and Elijah talking with him, and then a cloud descended and the voice of God called out, "This is my Son, the beloved, listen to him!" And then, just as quickly as it had started, it was over – but none of them, none of them, was ever the same again.

William Willimon put it so beautifully: "In certain, glorious, unexpected moments, we are given a gift of a vision of God when Christ's real presence seems especially real to us. In such moments, we worship. The everyday world is transfigured. We are transfigured."

And so they were – all of them. They carried that glorious vision down the mountain with them and it changed them for all the days to come. How?

Well, I think it renewed the intensity with which they ministered with Jesus. As they went about the crowds, healing and teaching, and caring and witnessing, they did it with a deeper sense of who he was. There was no doubt that they were at the side of God's only begotten Son, the lamb of God come to take away the sin of the world. He was no mere prophet, not just another good guy trying to help people, but the Savior of the world. They had seen it with their own eyes, heard God's voice with their own ears, and because they had, they were different now as they ministered with Jesus.

No doubt, it affected the way they reached out to others, and but more importantly, the passion with which they invited others to know him too. I can't help but think about that line in the hymn "Pass It On" that goes like this: "I wish for you, my friend, this happiness that I've found." Surely, after being with Jesus on the Mount of Transfiguration and seeing him in all his glory, they wanted others to have that experience and know him too.

A second way in which they were no doubt changed by that moment was that, no matter what happened after that in their lives, they would remember the glory yet to come. And we all know some of the things that happened in their lives – and some of them were really bad. They walked with Jesus through some tough times. Their own lives were in peril. And then they watched as their beloved friend, the one who had so profoundly changed their lives, was brutally murdered on a cruel cross. But then, even then, I have to believe, as painful as it was to endure that, that somewhere in the depths of their beings they remembered and trusted in the glory yet to come, in some ways because of their experience of the transfiguration.

You know, you can get through almost anything if you know what's on the other side. They knew that for Jesus, and indeed, even for them, the other side was glory – new life with God for all the days to come. And so they endured whatever life brought their way.

I sometimes wonder if this moment on the mountain made those three disciples more open to visions from God like that one. It's like after Moses saw the burning bush, I always imagined that he was constantly keeping an eye open for other ways that God might appear in his life.

Do we? Do we keep an eye open for the ways God might be speaking to us? I hope so, but sometimes I doubt it. We're too busy, too distracted. You know, I read an article in the Sunday paper a couple of weeks ago that said we're ruining our vacations with our smartphones. We're either so distracted by doing things on them that we miss what's right in front of us, or we're looking at the things on our vacations mostly through the camera lens. Peter had a little bit of that going on up on the mountain when he wanted to "capture the moment" by erecting booths. Same thing. We get distracted and we miss moments and signs from God.

Moments when the veil is lifted and we come close to heaven. Moments when we know that we know that we know God is real, and God is here, and God loves us. Moments when we are transfigured.

Moments like that child experienced in that precious children's book we heard – when that owl hooted back and came soaring in overhead, majestically, proud, there. Absolutely breathtaking and a reminder of the God who created all things.

I hope you've had a moment or moments like that in your life. I suspect that most of you have. I know that I have. Moments when my heart just melted with the knowledge that God was very present in that place, and that life was good, and all would be well.

I told you about one before, a transfigurational moment in my life. I was doing a funeral and I made a mistake during the graveside service. I mispronounced a name, and I was so upset about it, and at the end of the service, the widow of the man who died came right at me. My heart fell because I felt like I had hurt her with that mistake, and I didn't know what she was going to say. She had every right to be hurt and angry and say what she wanted. But do you know what she did? She took my face in her hands and told me what a wonderful job I had done, and that when she died, she wanted me to do her service as well. A thin place, a vision of God and God's love and grace? Absolutely. A moment of transfiguration.

Or last summer, at Vacation Bible School. I remember sitting at a table in Weldin Hall watching the children from our church and Wrights AME Church coming and going to their classes and activities. And at one point, two precious little girls, one black and one white, came skipping into the room holding hands, making their way to the craft table, and then they turned and hugged each other. My eyes filled with tears, because God was in the midst of that. In this world so filled with strife and still filled with racism, here was love pure and simple – a picture of what could be and is because of Jesus Christ.

Friends, moments like these, moments of transfiguration, moments that take us to thin places where Christ's presence is so very real, happen all the time. We don't know when they're coming, but come they will – for that's how God is. Breaking into our lives every once and a while in a special way to remind us that we are never alone, that he loves us, that he sent his Son for us, and all will be well.

Thanks be to God – the God of transfiguration, the God who gives us what we need everyday of our lives, but sometimes, in some high and holy moments gives us even more – and for that, we are so very, very grateful. Thanks be to God!

Amen.