

For the people of St. Philip's
Transfiguration, Year A
Feb. 2, 2008
Maria Hoecker, preacher

This week I have really struggled with this reading, and yet it seems as though it should be an easy one from which to preach. The Transfiguration is such a famous story, and yet I find myself puzzled by it. It may be because it reminds me of the otherness of Jesus. Of course you could say that the whole of the gospels do that: they tell us about this amazing man who heals people, feeds thousands from a few sandwiches, and walks on water. But surely this Jesus is still a human being who gets tired, gets frustrated with people, one who needs to eat and drink and sleep. The Transfiguration feels different, mythic in proportion. It seems a bit surreal, with all its whiteness and light and visits from people long gone.

So what's it all about? It is told in both Mark and Luke as well, and seems to be what Peter is referring to in 2 Peter 1:16—18. *'For we did not follow cleverly devised myths when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we have been witnesses of his majesty. For he received honor and glory from God the Father when that voice was conveyed to him by the majestic glory, saying, "this is my Son, my Beloved, with whom I am well pleased". We ourselves heard this voice come from heaven, while we were with him on the holy mountain.'* This is a story of great importance. Moses was seen as representing the law and Elijah representing the prophets, so that their presence here may somehow be connected to the idea of Jesus as the fulfillment of the law and the one who would fulfill all that had been prophesied. Luke goes further and says that they were talking to Jesus about his departure which he was about to accomplish at Jerusalem.

Mark places this story in the middle of the gospel, and there are links to both the baptism of Jesus at the beginning of the gospel and the crucifixion at the end. In the transfiguration we are given a glimpse of Jesus' identification with the God of heaven. Philippians 2:5—8 talks about Jesus giving up something to become human, but in the transfiguration it seems as though something of the glory which he gave up comes seeping in, it can no longer be hidden and those chosen few disciples are there to witness it.

The disciples saw something here that terrified them, and Peter's response is to capture it and bring it under control, to reframe it. "let's build a box around this and preserve it."

God's love can be terrifying. Not because we fear reprisal, or fear that we'll be rejected--God's love is terrifying because it is so abundant, so lavish, so unconditional, so available to all. When we get a glimpse of such dazzling love and acceptance embodied through Jesus Christ, we suddenly know that if we truly let the reality of such love embrace us, we too will be changed beyond recognition.

As the story continues: there is a voice from heaven, similar to the voice at Jesus' baptism, but addressed to the disciples now rather than to Jesus, saying, this is my Son, the beloved, listen to him — or go on listening to him, which is the force of the Greek. The gospel has reached a point of no return, there is no longer room for doubt about Jesus' identity. He may be a human being but he is also God's son, and the disciples are commanded to listen to him, not just on occasion but continually.

There is a saying out there that we visit mountaintops but we *inhabit* the valleys. Jesus came down from that mountain, to continue on toward his suffering and death. Did the fully human Jesus need the transfiguration experience? Did he need that moment to give him a sense of who he was in God, fully divine, so that he could face all that was to come?

And if it wasn't for our familiarity with the whole story, crucifixion would seem an unlikely ending to such a

transforming experience as we read today, and yet here it is, the Son of Man will be raised from the dead. There is something about the absolute assurance of who he was in God, that seems to have been of great importance to Jesus, to give him the strength to do the will of God wholeheartedly.

The only thing Jesus had in abundance was the power of an incredible idea and the idea is this: God's *love is the most powerful force in the world*. Love is such a simple word, but I'm not simplifying or reducing human interaction to such a common level that it means nothing. Let me suggest that if we take everything Jesus ever said or did, it would all come down to this: that love, *sacrificial* love, is the most powerful force in the world. It's not about sentimental emotionalism, nor unbridled passion, nor seductive power...those are not the fullest expressions of love. There is a place in Jesus' ministry where love means abundant grace. It's not a love that caters *to* people but it is a love that cares *for* people-- even though they may have made terrible mistakes, even though they forget to thank you, even if they don't follow the rules, even though they betray your trust in them.

It's not an easy thing to bring a mountain top experience down to where we live. We all have a bit of Peter in us. When something wonderful happens we want to capture that moment, and hold on to it. But we can't do that. Life continues to move around us and all we have of that moment is our memories and our feelings. Peter is like most of us--when we experience life changing moments we want to transcend life and stay where we are--it's not our desire to move on.

Sr. Joan Chittister, a contemporary writer and theologian, says that "real religion is not about transcending life, real religion is about transforming life. The gospel of the Transfiguration calls us to Sabbath; calls us to be enlightened." The Transfiguration is not about staying in the moment, it is about absorbing the moment, living into the moment, embodying the moment so that you are changed and transformed by it. The Transfiguration is a moment of holiness, and a moment that came out of prayer. Prayer changes and transforms us. Prayer is central to our relationship with God and with each other. Prayer gets us in touch with the holy, gets us in touch with those moments in our lives when change is upon us. Prayer is not meant to protect us from what is out there, it is supposed to change the way we live *with* what is out there. Prayer transforms our actions, our thoughts., and how we react to a sacred moment.

We all try to follow Jesus in the things we do, the danger is in exhausting ourselves with the effort. We can build the best booths, can't we. Beautiful booths. It feels like a giant leap to allow *God* guide us toward God's love. Can it really be that simple? We have before us the season of Lent. It comes early this year. Six weeks stretch out ahead of us. I invite you to take some time to pray, with and without words. Carve out a real and regular Sabbath for yourself. Take the time away from busyness as Jesus did, to truly discover how much you are loved by God. Take some time as Lent approaches to pray for God's abundant love to transform you. Allow God's love to transfigure your ordinary moments into extraordinary grace. Feel it, take your life outside of the box. . It is from that place, in prayer beyond our words and imagination, that we will be able to truly and authentically love ourselves as God loves us. It is from that sacred place within that we can move outward to love others. Prayer will change and transform us so that we may change and transform the world.