

Last Epiphany/Transfiguration B Feb. 11, 2018

Overwhelming

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Historian and scholar on Celtic Spirituality Esther de Waal has said that when people enter places that completely overwhelm them, like grand cathedrals or monumental museums, instead of just taking it all in, they tend to gravitate toward the little plaques on the walls. These little plaques seem to offer the comfort such people are looking for, as these are the plaques that describe each little part of cathedrals like each stained-glass window or statue or work of art in a museum. De Waal notes that when people just can't seem to handle the sheer weight of an experience, they get through it by viewing explanations of small bits of it.

The problem with this strategy, de Waal says, is if a person spends most of their time reading the little plaques, they miss the opportunity to truly experience something; something that if they were open to it, might indeed overwhelm them, but it might also open their eyes to greater possibilities, and could even change them.

I wonder if many of us make the same, if comforting, mistake when approaching the Transfiguration of Jesus, which we just read in today's Gospel. It is an event that certainly comes across as overwhelming, at least that is how the disciples who witnessed it seem to react. And it isn't just the disciples; it is so overwhelming to some scholars they have tried to explain it as a misplaced post-resurrection experience, and plenty of scholars like argue whether or not it really happened. And of course, it is tempting to look for those plaques explaining the powerful images we are confronted with in the Transfiguration: such as the past heroes of the Old Testament standing with Jesus, and the image of his clothing suddenly becoming so white it seemed to glow. Each of these could be taken apart and explained, and many a worthy Bible scholar has done this work, and these can be interesting studies. But the very first person to do this kind of work was none other than Jesus' own disciple Peter himself.

Peter gets a lot of criticism from scholars and commentators, often because he appears to say things without thinking first, which he seems to do in today's Gospel. The author of Mark's Gospel told us the disciples were not just curious or surprised or shocked by following Jesus up an unnamed mountain to suddenly find him transfigured or changed before their eyes and in the company of past greats. The text says they were terrified, which probably indicates they were – quite understandably - overwhelmed. It is not difficult to imagine such a scene as

overwhelming and it must have been hard for them. So perhaps Peter did the one thing Ester de Waal has noticed people do when overwhelmed; he went looking for the plaque on the wall. Only, there wasn't a literal plaque on the side of the mountain, so Peter did the best he could: he tried to interpret the situation based on what he knew.

Peter's comments about building tents for Elijah, Moses and Jesus have been interpreted to mean Peter wanted to hang onto that moment, he wanted everyone and everything to stay the same or stay right there as long as possible. Many sermons have been preached on how we can't stay in those mountain top experiences and that eventually we have to come down off the mountain. And those aren't bad sermons, I've preached a few myself. But I wonder if instead of trying to hold onto that moment, Peter might have been trying to understand it by putting an overwhelming situation into a historical context. The tents he offered to build could have been a reference to the Jewish festival of the booths, a festival that commemorates the years the people of God spent wandering the wilderness after they fled from Egypt and celebrated both the harvest and the people's dependence on God. It's a joyful celebration where people build tents or booths and eat their meals, have prayer services, sing special songs, and sometimes even sleep in those tents.

While some interpret Peter's response to the Transfiguration of Jesus as wanting to stay in a powerful moment, he could have been recognizing it for what it was: something holy, something that brought the glorious past of God and God's people back to life, something that was illuminating Jesus, something deserving of joy, and Peter tried to respond by fitting what he saw on a plaque, putting his experience in a context he understood. Perhaps Peter was just trying to get through an overwhelming situation.

But maybe encountering Jesus is supposed to be overwhelming, at least in the sense that when following Jesus, we need to step back from time to time and instead of trying to fit Jesus into our own historical or ritual context, let Jesus be Jesus. If we let the Transfiguration speak for itself, perhaps that is what we might see. Up on the mountain Jesus wasn't *doing* anything: he wasn't healing anyone, he wasn't performing miracles, he wasn't teaching or telling parables, he wasn't fighting the temptations of Satan, he wasn't calling disciples, he wasn't talking back to Pharisees or overturning tables in the temple, he was just being what he is: God's Beloved Son. It wasn't any of the things he did that made him God's Son, instead he just was and is God With Us.

And that is a change from the days of Moses or Elijah; those great heroes who listened to and spoke for God and yet were somewhat separate from the people they led. In addition, both Moses and Elijah were believed to have been spared the pain of death, as we saw in our first reading where Elijah was carried away on a fiery chariot. Jesus' Transfiguration shows us God is up to something new, something different in who Jesus is: God's own Son, the Beloved with whom God is well pleased and Jesus, unlike Moses or Elijah, will not be spared the pain of death. That is also difficult to understand, and it can be overwhelming, especially for those who believe being loved by God means being spared any pain or discomfort. But maybe that is why Jesus did go down off that mountain after the Transfiguration, and then set his sights on Jerusalem and his own death. Because Jesus became Incarnate, to be with us, not to be separate from us in any way, but to be with us in every way. Jesus is no prophet above us telling us what God wants and then departed from us in glory, because God's Son is not a hero. He is God Incarnate, he shows us God desires not our blind obedience, but our presence. So, much so that God came to us in Jesus, to be present with us, even if that presence can be overwhelming for us.

And it doesn't only take momentous museums or grand cathedrals to provide overwhelming experiences of Transfiguration in our day and time. Several years ago, before I was married, I brought fresh baked cinnamon rolls to my neighbors after they returned my cat who had gotten out of my apartment. To me, those cinnamon rolls were nothing more than an expression of my gratitude; but to my neighbors, who had very little if any experience with people expressing genuine, heart-felt kindness, abundance, or generosity, my act of thanks overwhelmed them. And this simple act helped my neighbors begin to heal from some deep hurts, and become more open and trusting, for somehow in that act of gratitude, they had seen the Love of God in Christ and they changed, and began to sense they weren't alone. They not only began to realize they had a nice neighbor, they began to sense God is with them.

And that is the kind of thing that can happen when we step back, and let God be Present in Christ, who might use anything to shine with the light of Jesus into our lives and the lives of our neighbors. That alone is occasion for joy we don't have to memorialize in a plaque, just embrace.

We heard the Gospel account of the Transfiguration of Jesus today because of where we are in the Church calendar. Today is the last Sunday in the Season of Epiphany, after today we will join Jesus on his last journey to Jerusalem where we will again remember his arrest, trial, crucifixion, burial and resurrection. But

before that journey begins on Wednesday, today we have the Transfiguration to remind us of who Jesus is and that he has something even more powerful to show us. For some, it might even be the encouragement needed to help us steel ourselves for the season of Lent and holy week ahead of us.

It is also a day to embrace the joy of our life in Christ, who is with us no matter what, a joy we sometimes articulate in the word “alleluia” a word that means to praise God. And you might notice our hymns will have quite a few alleluias, just to lift that joy up a bit more. Today we will also participate in an old tradition called Burying the Alleluias. During the Season of Lent, as an expression of our penitence, we will refrain from saying the word Alleluia, until we proclaim Jesus’ resurrection during the Great Vigil of Easter. So today is our last chance to say alleluia for a while. And this year, we all have the opportunity to participate in this tradition individually. You were or should have been given a little piece of yellow paper. This is your invitation. I invite you to write the word ALLELUIA on that paper. On the other side, I invite you to write or maybe you’d rather draw, something that represents to you the joy of God with Us, of how you see God with you personally or with us as a parish. I’ve already given you an example with the cinnamon rolls. At the end of the service, you are invited to put your alleluia in the wooden box on the table by the door. The box will be closed and remain so until the alleluias will be brought back during the Great Vigil of Easter.

But even though the word will be absent from our worship services for a season, it doesn’t mean those moments of Christ-like transfiguring change can’t still happen. Perhaps by practicing reflecting today on what alleluia looks like for us, we might be better able to recognize them when we see them again, and be able to enter even the most overwhelming moments of being present with Jesus by joyfully embracing them and allowing them to change us by healing us, encouraging us, or inspiring hope in us.