

Sermon – Transfiguration – Sun Feb 23, 2020 – St James

Matthew 17:1-9

17Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and his brother John and led them up a high mountain, by themselves. ²And he was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became dazzling white. ³Suddenly there appeared to them Moses and Elijah, talking with him. ⁴Then Peter said to Jesus, “Lord, it is good for us to be here; if you wish, I will make three dwellings here, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.” ⁵While he was still speaking, suddenly a bright cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud a voice said, “This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!” ⁶When the disciples heard this, they fell to the ground and were overcome by fear. ⁷But Jesus came and touched them, saying, “Get up and do not be afraid.” ⁸And when they looked up, they saw no one except Jesus himself alone. ⁹As they were coming down the mountain, Jesus ordered them, “Tell no one about the vision until after the Son of Man has been raised from the dead.”

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This morning, Transfiguration Sunday, I am going to talk to you about encounters with God; how we yearn for them, perhaps without realizing. And even though we may feel starved at times, God's presence, the Divine **does** break into our lives if we are 'tuned in'. God IS with us.

'The Wizard of Oz' opened last night at the Capitol Theatre here in Moncton. On the radio Friday morning after Dorothy was interviewed they played 'Somewhere over the Rainbow'. It hit me. That song is just dripping with yearning!

Somewhere, over the rainbow
Way up high
There's a land that I heard of
Once in a lullaby.

Somewhere, over the rainbow
Skies are blue
And the dreams that you dare to dream
Really do come true.

Maybe in this morning's Gospel, Peter, James and John went 'over the rainbow' to another land way up high where dreams really do come true. What happened to Peter, James and John was outside of the ordinary, beyond rational comprehension. For a moment the veil to the beyond was pulled back. First they saw Jesus transfigured. 'his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became dazzling white...'. (and there was no bleach or borax around) Wow! What a sight that must have been. Then they saw Moses, the bearer of the law and Elijah, the great Prophet talking with Jesus. How would they understand that? Then suddenly a bright cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud a voice said, "This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!" At this point, understandably, they fell to the ground, overcome by fear. Wouldn't we collapse from fear as well? Jesus reassures. He tells them to get up and not to be afraid. But he does not explain. This is the territory of mystery. This is the culmination of revelation...in the series of epiphanies before this, of Jesus showing or revealing

who he is...this is the most dramatic revelation...he is no ordinary man...he shines...he speaks to visions, a voice echoes from a cloud...this is more than everyday reason can explain. The Lord God is present here. Peter, James and John went down the mountain with Jesus changed. Yes, they still messed up later...we remember especially Peter denying knowing Jesus. But something was embedded in them that day...'Listen to him.' Said the voice.

And don't we in our heart of hearts thirst after or yearn for such experiences ourselves? We seek connection with the Divine, what is holy, what is sacred. We want to be reminded that there is far more to our world than meets the eye...far more than can be understood and explained. We can encounter the beyond...the transcendent...if we stop for a moment to notice. God is present with revelations all around us. It can happen in many different 'ordinary' ways... We are not likely to literally climb a mountain for a mountain top revelation. But we have all likely had other experiences, brushes with God, times when we have felt something beyond, something we can not explain and we have thought 'God was mixed up in that'.

Some of us, maybe all of us have felt God's presence at times in worship. When I went to Wycliffe College in Toronto, studying to become a priest, I loved going to St Mary Magdalene's. It is an Anglo Catholic, a high Anglican church with much ritual, a beautiful choir and magnificent organ. I remember particularly one Palm Sunday there...the Palm procession, the clouds of incense. I was moved, in awe... it was a holy moment.

But very informal worship in the log chapel at Camp Medley also evoked a similar feeling. I served there as camp Chaplain a number of times. I remember the evening services...campers belting out the Praise songs with all their hearts. I remember being carried away by the music and the energy. These were also Holy Moments when we felt God's presence.

Sometimes there are places which feel holy to us. In England there is such a place called Mount Grace. It is as it's name suggests, a 'mount' where there is a chapel. It is a quiet spot with a vista, overlooking the Vale of Mowbray. It is a pilgrimage

site, but a lesser known one, above the ancient Mount Grace Priory. It is here that Tim's parents' ashes are buried and where there are two trees planted in their memory. One is a beautiful Mountain Ash with pink berries. It seems Tim's whole family feel this is a special place. Tim's brother proposed up there and others light candles in the chapel to pray for our sick or to give thanks for those who are healing well. Thin places, the Celts call these...places where the veil is thin, where we feel God is close.

But I suggest God is closer than that. Isn't God revealed, and doesn't God transfigure our faces when we make eye contact with another? This it seems can extend to our interactions with animals. On Friday on CBC's 'Maritime Noon' programme, Richard Louv was interviewed about his latest book called '**Our Wild Calling: How Connecting with Animals Can Transform Our Lives—and Save Theirs**'. He told this story. One day he was in his boat on a lake when he saw 2 Golden Eagles eating a dead fish. He pulled up slowly and sat watching. These birds maintained eye contact with him, looking up every few seconds as they ate. He felt a shift between him and the birds. Whoever he was in those moments is who he is...he considers there was an electricity, an energy like God...and he asks 'Are we paying attention.' He says since 1970, 30% of birds are gone due to our lack of awareness. He says loneliness is now the greatest cause of early death. It is an epidemic...daily loneliness, is partly due to our disconnect with nature. We stay indoors. It has a profound impact on our health – over 1000 studies show we have a fundamental need to make contact with other species...that there are way more than 5 senses...they are there...but we don't know they're there...horse whisperers who can see horses' facial expressions. God is mixed up in all living things and when we reach out to others, whether other humans or other species, the magic of communion begins.

God is everywhere. When a child is born we glimpse the beyond – it is a miracle we cannot entirely understand. Death is another time we feel God's closeness...Death is another time of transcendence.

The message from the Transfiguration Gospel is that God is with us. Our God is a wondrous God capable of more than we can ever understand. In that wonder is the certainty that God always very much with us, reaching out to us! Let us 'Listen' and notice. Amen.

I turned to speak to God
About the world's despair;
But to make bad matters worse
I found God wasn't there.

God turned to speak to me
(Don't anybody laugh)
God found I wasn't there,
At least not over half.
Robert Frost.

What if God is shouting and whispering and reasoning with us all the time and we're just too preoccupied to pay attention.

This is symbolic narrative, created to say something. In Matthew's case we gave a beautiful image of human beings awed by the divine, but encouraged to stand on their feet and not to fear. It is a moment of profound grace. The meaning of grace we might, indeed, define as the invitation to stand up and not to fear (echoes of 1 John 4:17-18 on relating to God: 'There is no fear in love; for perfect love casts out fear'). It is to be lifted out of our inadequacy and smallness.

Girls at check out.
Carrying child and the birth of a child.
The death of a loved one.

Transformations of consciousness...eye contact...time bends...story...in his boat on a lake...thought they were 2 vultures...actually 2 golden eagles...maintained eye contact for a few seconds as they ate...felt a shift between them and the animals...talked to his son...whoever he was in those moments is who he is...Habitat of the Heart...Martin Buber... considers it an electricity like God...are we paying attention. We have no idea what the animal is thinking – mystery...but we do have empathy...people who study animals Gordon critical anthropomorphism...2nd step use imagination...what's it like for that snake to be alive on the earth...step of empathy...predisposes us to ask the right questions...Since 1970 30% of birds are gone...our lack of awareness...loneliness cause of early death...epidemic...daily loneliness, rooted in species loneliness...we are surrounded of extended community of animals...why the rise of lack of empathy...disconnect with nature...indoors...profound impact on our health – over 1000 studies...fundamental need to make contact with other species...way more than 5 senses...they are there...but we don't know they're there...horse whisperers..we can't see horses' facial expressions...sounds, behaviours, bird language...including behaviours. Crows. Animal assisted therapy. Autistic woman and dog Kobo...Kobo attacked by non service animals in grocery stores...hold her down...during her 'spells'. She did same for him...giving back – reciprocity principle...feels like looking into a different universe when looking into the eyes of a deer or other animals. Ripples..we create ripples when we intersect with other lives. Animals moving into cities...he suggests 'neighbourhood wildlife' watch groups...watch wild and domestic animals in their neighbourhoods. Look out for animals...teach not to feed. But also watch out for people. Protect wild animals and people. Cats have own language only with person who owns them. Need for connection. Therapeutic. For every moment of healing received