

Transfiguration

I love watching the sun rise. Twice in my life I have lived where the eastern horizon was so open that the sun came up precisely at the predicted time. Once was in seminary when we lived a few minutes' walk from Lake Michigan. When we lived in Mount Pleasant, our house was on the eastern edge of town, with only fields and a park in the distance.

In those days I liked to get up early and watch the sky slowly brighten. Soon a rosy glow would show where the sun itself would appear. During the last minute or two before sunrise, the horizon would get intensely clear. On Lake Michigan I could see individual waves on the horizon even though they were miles away. Then suddenly a bright shaft of light burst forth and a new day began. I would have to turn away because the brightness was so intense. Each time it brought joy, a transforming moment of utter clarity.

Those sunrises are the closest I can come to a real-world likeness of the Transfiguration – what we call the mountaintop experience of Jesus and his three disciples, celebrated every year on August 6th. Surely that experience had the brightness of utter clarity. It was a transforming moment. At the same time, Peter, James, and John had no idea what to make of it. Nothing in their lives had prepared them for it. Peter expressed their confusion when he offered to build three dwellings, as though to extend the whole experience. Their silence afterwards showed that they were still processing what had happened. They were afraid to tell anyone because it was like nothing else on earth. What did happen that day?

This morning's other readings don't help much in providing an explanation. In Exodus, we heard that Moses was transformed whenever he talked with God on the mountain. His face started to shine so much that people were afraid to get near him. He had to use a veil to keep them from being distracted. That's unusual, but hardly unimaginable; even today we hear of people who seem to glow with the presence of God.

The second reading used the Transfiguration to authenticate the letter as coming from Peter. Other parts of this particular letter make it difficult to believe that it actually came from Peter himself, but that's beside the point. In ancient times it would be perfectly acceptable for a disciple to write in Peter's name, applying his teaching to a new situation. It reminds us that our faith comes from eyewitnesses to the life and teaching of Jesus himself. Even so, the letter doesn't give us any fresh insight into the Transfiguration.

What about Moses and Elijah? What were they doing there? One suggestion is that they represent the Law and the Prophets. They share what one commentator calls "unusual departures from this world." Moses saw the Promised Land from across the Jordan but he wasn't allowed to go there. He died on the mountain and was buried in an unmarked grave. Mike Ferdinands, a former member of this cathedral, once remarked to me that through the Transfiguration Moses finally got to the Promised Land. Elijah's presence makes more sense. He had been taken up alive into heaven in a whirlwind, and was expected to return in advance of the Messiah. In the Gospels Jesus connects Elijah with John the Baptist.

The Transfiguration is so extraordinary that it is difficult to put it in everyday terms. Perhaps the best key to understanding it comes through its connection with Epiphany. If you feel like you've heard about the Transfiguration more often than whenever August 6th happens to fall on a Sunday, that's because it also shows up *every* year on the last Sunday after Epiphany. In the Eastern Orthodox tradition, Epiphany is associated with three manifestations of the divinity of Jesus. One is the coming of the Magi, the three wise men, which is what we celebrate on the day of Epiphany, January 6th. The second manifestation is turning water into wine at the wedding at Cana. The third is the Transfiguration.

Seen in that light, this whole story starts to make sense. We know that God is ultimately beyond our knowing. We simply don't have the capacity to understand something so infinite. There will always be mystery. If the wise men remind us to worship Jesus, and the wedding at Cana shows how Jesus transforms the things of this world, then the Transfiguration reinforces the mystery and brightness of God's glory. God as light is a common biblical theme. The Gospel of John continually contrasts the light of Christ with the darkness of the world. Encountering the living God through Jesus Christ fills us with light and leaves us awestruck. The experience cannot be put into words, yet we know we are transformed.

I no longer live where I can see the horizon, and I miss that. I could watch the sun rise every day. It's probably better for my long-term vision that I don't. The blinding sun is just too much when it finally appears. What I find remarkable is that the light of God is so much brighter than the sun yet does not blind us. Instead, it gives us intense clarity, filling us with God's love and radiance. Through the Transfiguration God calls us to listen to Jesus, to be so caught up in his light that we, too, shine with the light of God. It's a mystery, to be sure, but one on which we can fix our hope – that one day we, too, will see the brightness and the majesty and the glory of God.

[The Transfiguration: Exodus 34:29-35; 2 Peter 1:13-21; Luke 9:28-36.]