

The Transfiguration: Four Ways to Enter into the Divine Mystery Reading: Mt. 17:1-9 Yr/A
By the Rev. Karen Faye Siegfriedt; Trinity Episcopal Church, Sutter Creek, CA 2/26/17

During the past four weeks, we have been listening to Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. In this sermon (as you may recall), he blesses the poor, the meek, the mournful, the peacemakers, and the persecuted. In summary, he blesses the total opposite of those who are valued in today's world. He then sets the bar very high, calling us to righteous living and healthy relationships. And to top it off, he tells us to turn the other cheek and pray for our enemies. For ordinary people who rely only on their ego strength, following these injunctions is basically impossible.

To perceive the world as God sees it, to embrace the goodness of all creation, and to follow in the compassionate footsteps of Jesus, something above and beyond our ego strength is required. In summary, we need the transformative gift of grace. Grace is a powerful force that pulses through our hearts and minds when we are connected to God. Grace can change our perception, heal our minds, and transform our lives. This grace, this Divine Force, is available to those who are open to God's Spirit. It was grace that operated in today's gospel story, connecting the disciples more intimately to the Divine Mystery. Let's take a closer look.

The story begins with Jesus and three apostles taking a break from the maddening crowd by spending quiet time on a mountain top. Once there, Jesus' appearance turns white, the apostles have a vision, and Peter babbles something about making three huts. They then hear a voice from heaven, fall to the ground in fear, and are later told to zip their lips about all that they had seen and heard. I don't know about you, but I think this is one of the stranger stories in the gospels. Commentators over the centuries have tried to figure out what the gospel is attempting to communicate in this story of the transfiguration. Is it a misplaced post-resurrection story? Is it meant to communicate Jesus' divine sonship? Is it written to connect Jesus' prophetic ministry with that of Moses who spoke to God on a mountaintop? Or are the apostles eating a few too many mushrooms?

For us 21st century skeptics who are educated in a scientific paradigm, understanding mystical experiences is foreign to our sensibilities. Many of us are not open to the subtle and gentle promptings of the Holy Spirit, that Spirit of God in whom we live, and move, and have our being. Others are not closely aligned with the Divine Mystery. As a result, we are stuck in the outer physical world, diminishing our potential for a fuller and more meaningful inner life. In summary, we often miss the epiphanies in our midst.

The left-brain-oriented Western mind has been victorious in the outer world, allowing us to achieve great control over the outer world. That is how we produced the industrial and scientific revolution which is going full throttle. But when it comes to connecting to the human race on an authentic, intimate, and compassionate level, we struggle. When it comes to advancing our spiritual natures above and beyond our emotions, we are novices.

Today's gospel can be summarized as an epiphany of God, the Divine Mystery. An epiphany is a moment in which we see or understand something in a new or very clear way. It is an "ah-ha" moment. An epiphany can come in the form of a new idea, an understanding of a difficult concept, gaining a new insight, or being able to see someone in a new light. These small epiphanies are part and parcel of everyday life, recognized by those who take the time to notice and apprehend.

However, in today's gospel, the apostles experienced a big epiphany, a fantastic vision, one that included seeing Jesus in a totally new light. They were so moved both emotionally and spiritually, that they fell to the ground in fear. Rarely does someone experience such a vivid epiphany. So how can we skeptics begin to understand this epiphany of the past and what insights can we gather from it for our spiritual journey today?

Four phrases stand out in today's reading: *Mountaintop, transfigured, listen, and do not be afraid*. While we cannot create moments of spontaneous awakening nor can we control the movement of the Holy Spirit, these phrases can help guide us into spiritual practices that can deepen our relationship with God as well as help us in our own transformation to be fully alive.

Mountaintop: "Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter, James, and his brother John and led them up a high mountain by themselves." (Mt. 17) Setting aside time with no agenda except to be present in the NOW, is the spiritual discipline of solitude. Perhaps solitude is of the most important of all the spiritual disciplines for today, especially for busy people who are frantic with getting things done, distracted with surfing the internet, and trying

to fit in more and more activities. Practicing solitude is not the same thing as sitting at home alone, feeling sorry for yourself or turning on the TV as a distraction from anxious thoughts. Rather solitude is a creation of an open, empty space, whereby we can be found by God. It is a nourishing posture where insight, renewal, and strength become possible. Maybe you don't have the where-with-all to trek up to a mountaintop to spend time alone. But perhaps you can begin the practice of solitude by simply sitting quietly in your car for 5 minutes before opening the door to go into the store. Perhaps you can walk quietly in your yard each morning or evening and smell the plants, the flowers, or the bushes with the intention of giving thanks for creation. In the stillness of day, solitude provides an opportunity to experience epiphanies, those ah-ha moments that can transform one's life.

Transfigured: "Jesus was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun and his clothes became dazzling white." (Mt. 17) The Greek word used for this event is "metamorphosis," a striking alteration in appearance, character, or circumstances. In this epiphany, the disciples saw Jesus differently. No longer did they see Jesus as a poor, Jewish man in his thirties, with bad breath, dirty fingernails, and callused feet, trying his best to preach the word of God. Instead, they could see Jesus' glorious-authentic self, one who was beloved by God and with whom God was well pleased. Today, some people see Jesus as a problem to be solved. But just imagine how these folks' lives could be transformed if they were willing and able to perceive him as the mouthpiece for God, as the way, the truth, and the life, as the template for healthy human life.

Being able to see people in a new light is a blessing, and often gives us a better appreciation for their gifts and presence in our lives. Recently, I have had such an epiphany. The Forward Day by Day meditations this month were written by Minda Cox, a woman who was born in India with no arms or legs. If I had simply seen Minda sitting at a park in a wheelchair, I would have felt sorry for her and her limited life. The image of a woman with no hands or legs would distress me. But not so with Minda. She was transfigured before me, day after day as I read her meditations. No longer was she a severely disabled adoptee, but a Light of inspiration that shone through her writings; writings filled with courage, hope, and connection to God. St. Irenaeus once said: "The glory of God is the human person fully alive." Minda is fully alive and that is what we are all called to be.

Listen: The spiritual life is all about opening a space to hear God's voice. If we do all of the talking, then we are not listening. In today's gospel, Peter is overwhelmed by the vision and starts babbling about making three huts. Suddenly he hears a voice from the cloud say: "This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!" (Mt. 17) Sometimes when we don't understand something, there is a temptation to just keep on talking. Other times we are so uncomfortable with the silence, we fill the empty space with music or chatter. Many of us haven't learned to sit in silence and so we keep on prattling about mundane things, forgoing the opportunity to really listen. If we want to hear God's voice more fully, then we need to find the time in our busy lives for silence, solitude, stillness, and prayer. God's primary language is silence. All other languages are poor translations. If you do not feel close to God or to other people, maybe it is time to listen more often.

Do not be afraid: Jesus came and touched them, saying, "Get up and do not be afraid." (Mt. 17) We all have had the experience of fear. Fear is a feeling induced by perceived danger or threat. We are afraid of so many things such as fear of scarcity, failure, rejection, death, taking risks, being disappointed or being hurt. Fear is the root cause of all misery in the world that keeps us in a constant state of agitation and turmoil. Fear plays havoc on our physical and mental health. Fear saps our joy. The opposite of fear is love and that is what the religious life is all about. While it may be difficult to overcome our fears by "trying not to be afraid," love is the best way to overcome fear. Begin with acts of kindness and then move to acts of generosity. If you come across someone in need, respond to them with love. Jesus is the embodiment of love. Love is an act. Love is a choice. And with that choice, all things become possible.

Today is the last Sunday of the season of Epiphany. If you haven't had an epiphany by now, that is, you are not sure how God is working in your life, don't panic. The season of Lent is a wonderful time to open your heart up to the presence of God by practicing the spiritual disciplines. Take time for solitude, be attentive to the stories of others, try to perceive people in a different light, and let go of your fear by focusing on compassionate thoughts and acts of love. But most of all, listen to the Beloved, with whom God is well pleased.