

"Sacred Moments"
Mark 9:2-9

Today is Transfiguration Sunday when we remember Jesus' experience of God's light on a mountain. This Sunday marks the end of the Epiphany season which is all about the light of God's love breaking into our world through the ministry and life of Jesus Christ. This light transforms us and our world and renews us to be the people God is creating us to be. This past week, I read a story that was about a modern day transfiguration. It did not take place in a church building or among people we expect to be holy and honest. It did not even take place on a mountain top. In the United Kingdom, four of the country's former leading banks chiefs recently said they were "profoundly and unreservedly sorry" for events leading to the banking crisis. The four made their comments at the opening of a hearing conducted by Members of Parliament. Former bosses of the banks RBS and HBOS apologized to the Treasury select committee for the events that led up to their banks needing to be taken largely into public ownership. During this hearing, they were accused of living in denial, destroying great British institutions, and – in one case – having a "different moral compass" from other people. During the hearing, the four former executives offered "profound and unqualified apologies for all the distress that has been caused." One of them said that he was repeating an apology he had already given to shareholders. Another said: "We are profoundly and, I think I would say, unreservedly sorry at the turn of events. All of us have lost a great deal of money, including of course a great number of our colleagues, and we are very sorry for that." Despite how we tend to view the greed and sin that led us to the current financial crisis, I found myself moved by the apologies, as we often never hear people owning up to their mistakes, especially those in high positions. To me this is profound transformation, a major turning point, an in-breaking of God's light into the world in a very difficult time!

This is what is at the heart of our story today. This was a major turning point in Jesus' ministry. The chapters in the Gospel of Mark before this story are about Jesus' ministry in Galilee. After this story, Jesus' ministry starts heading to Jerusalem, to the cross. In order for Jesus to be able to face the powers of persecution and opposition, he had to have the fullness of God's presence and light. So, up on a mountain where people believed they were closer to God, Jesus and some of his disciples went to pray. The appearance of Moses and Elijah alongside Jesus affirms his equality with them, perhaps even his superiority to them, and their joint participation in the eternal plans of God. The divine affirmation of Jesus as the beloved son, the one to whom alone the disciples are to listen, asserts the presence of God in Jesus. Jesus being transfigured and having his clothes become dazzling white also made another significant connection with the Jewish tradition. The *shekinah* of God, a word used in rabbinic writings, expressed divine imminence or universal presence. The word literally meant "that which dwells" and clearly designated God's presence on earth. This connection to the light was connected to how Moses' face was shining with light every time he was in the presence of God. This was the experience of several people in the Bible as they experienced the fullness of God's presence. This is the presence that led the prophets and the disciples to face the challenges of their day to do God's will.

Scholars believe that the Gospel of Mark was written around the year 70 CE. This was a time of persecution and rejection for the Christians to whom Mark was writing. They were being rejected by the Jewish leadership as outsiders to the Jewish faith. They were also being persecuted by the Roman government under Nero. So, this was a great message of hope for them to hear about how Jesus was filled with the light of God as he faced persecution. This was an invitation to them to think about God filling them with the power of God's Spirit and light to be

able to endure the pain they were experiencing. In verse 49 of this chapter in Mark, the followers of Jesus are reminded that "everyone will be salted by fire." Persecution and suffering were part of the story of faith. Following Jesus did not mean the end of their struggles and suffering. It actually meant more suffering.

This message is difficult for us because we want to believe that by following Christ, our lives would be made happier and that we would be shielded from suffering. We also often have a simplistic image of God that is more like magic and fairy tales. In Syria, the Greek Orthodox Church has a great festival for the Transfiguration. People celebrate it with fireworks and picnics. As a child I loved all the festivities and most importantly I loved the story of the transfiguration of Jesus. It was the story of my hero being filled with such magical power so that he could fight the bad guys. This simplistic image left me thinking that the power of God was like that of Superman or the Hulk and all I had to do is just wait for something magical to happen for me to save me from suffering and pain.

Yet, the power of Transfiguration for me is that God's light comes to the world to give us the power and courage to go through times of suffering while knowing that we are loved. The transformation of God's love in our world does not come from outside of our pain but through it. This takes a great maturity and imagination of faith because it seems to contradict our simplistic images of God.

In his book, *Your God is too Small*, J. B. Phillips analyzed society's misconceptions about what Christians believe. He observed that God had become remote and ridiculous, irrelevant to the misery of the world as we experience it. A theological imbalance had become the cheap parody of Christian faith, which remains so in the minds of many people today. We can get stuck worrying about the technology or the metaphysics of transfiguration and whether it really happened this way or that way. But these are truly not the questions of faith. These are "modern"/intellectual questions of the closed-system thoughts of both fundamentalists and rationalists. What we need to see here are God's deeper mysteries. In a universe with forty billion galaxies, each of which may have a billion or more solar systems like our own, there is no need to be humble in our imagination. We can "think big" and know that divine presence, power, and possibility is more than we can ask or imagine.

The true message of Transfiguration is about the presence of God in our world and our lives to transform us to be people who know how to face pain and even persecution while knowing that we are loved beyond measure. God is with us walking with us on mountain tops and in the shadows of life and that's what makes us have hope and courage.

Our invitation on this Transfiguration Sunday is to learn about the power of those sacred moments when the presence of God is almost physically palpable to us. We can feel it. We know it in our whole being because it transforms us to go about life as redeemed people, as loved people. That is why our prayer life is key to the wellness of our whole world. In order for us to act in the world according to God's will, we need to be transfigured. We need to be filled with the Spirit in order for us to be able to be united with God's mission in the world. In his book, *Everything Belongs*, Richard Rohr notes that "Prayer is the ultimate empowerment of the people of God, and may be why we clerics prefer laws and guilt, though they often disempower us and make us live in insufficiency and doubt. Prayer, however, gives us a sense of abundance and connectedness...the prayer of silence is not so much to express, but to experience...church only 'works' with people who have some real life with God."

These times of being transformed by the Spirit, these sacred moments, can bring radical and amazing changes to our lives and our world, sometimes in ways we would never expect. A friend of mine, who is no longer with us in this life, Rev. Fuad Bahnan, was born in Jerusalem. Then after the war he had to move to Lebanon with his family. For over thirty years, Rev. Bahnan served a small Presbyterian congregation in Beirut, Lebanon in the mainly Muslim part of the city, West Beirut. 1983 was the year that the armies of Israel drove north into Lebanon. No one knew how far north they would go. Few people in Lebanon thought that they would go as far as Beirut. But members of Bahnan's church thought that the Israelis would indeed take Beirut and would then try to starve any Palestinian fighters left in the city. So, the session of Bahnan's church decided to arrange for the purchase of a large amount of canned food for the siege. They were right, of course. The siege came. West Beirut was totally cut off. No one could enter or leave. No food was allowed in. The session of Pastor Bahnan's church met again, this time to make arrangements for distributing the food they had stockpiled. At that session meeting, two different proposals came to the table. The first went like this: The food would be distributed first to Muslim neighbors, then to nonmember Christians, and lastly, if there was any left over, to members of the church. The session meeting lasted six hours. This was a long debate because of the intense tensions between Christians and Muslims. It ended when an older, quiet, and much-respected elder—a woman—stood up, and cried out: "If we do not demonstrate the love of Christ in this place, who will?" The first proposal was passed. The food was distributed first to Muslims, then to other Christians, and finally, to members of the congregation. In the end, there was enough for everyone.

May the blessing of the mystery of the Transfiguration bring the same transformation to each of us as we continue this journey of faith with Christ. Amen.