

Thin Places

Rev. Eugene N. Nelson, Jr.
The Community Church of Sebastopol
February 15, 2015 Transfiguration Sunday

Mark 9:2-9

A memory shared by Barbara Brown Taylor: "A couple of summers ago, my husband Ed and I went to Ireland. We both have roots there. It is that Celtic sense of place that is so appealing – of holy trees, holy wells, holy mountains – 'thin places' as the Irish call them – places where the veil between this world and the next is so sheer that it is easy to step through. There are so many of them in Ireland."

"You can be walking down an ordinary country lane and all of a sudden see a footpath leading off to the left. Follow it for a couple of hundred feet and you come to a little mossy hole full of crystal clear water. It would be easy to mistake it for an ordinary little watering hole if it were not for the tidy bank of stones around it, set there hundreds of years ago by people who recognized a 'thin place' right there in the middle of a sheep pasture. If you can stop all the racket in your own mind and body, you can sometimes feel it for yourself – a freshness that drenches you as thoroughly as a shower. How it works is a complete mystery, but there is no denying the effect. Simply to stand near is to experience living water."

I read her words and my mind goes back to one of the last times I saw my sister, Sheri. She was near death, suffering from a cancerous brain tumor. She was lying in bed, looking up toward the ceiling when she said, "I see Ma." "Ma" was our grandmother, my mother's mother, who had died a few years earlier. I have not considered myself to be a mystic, but in that moment, I believe Sheri was in a thin place – the veil between this world and the next very thin, so thin she could almost step through, which eventually she did.

I am well aware that today's text, Jesus' Transfiguration, is a challenging one. The cloud, the voice from heaven, the appearance of Moses and Elijah, Jesus glowing with some inner light...not exactly your everyday experience, even a little weird. Who thinks of this stuff? To hear the story of the Transfiguration of Jesus is to have a sense that we are reading something from another realm, another plane of existence than the one on which we live our daily lives. It is something that is, I suspect, way beyond anything most of us have ever experienced. How can one ever hope to scientifically test and verify a story such as this? But perhaps rational examination is not the point. In this story perhaps we are encountering something that is pushing us beyond our capacities of examination and explanation, encountering what Kathleen Norris calls the "2 plus 2 equals 5" experience.

Why are you here today? Perhaps some of you were dragged here by an overenthusiastic friend or family member. Or perhaps you are here this morning hoping to receive something from the sermon, from the worship, something practical and relevant, that you can apply to your everyday life, something that will connect to the "real" world in which you live. Many preachers of my generation were taught that every sermon ought to leave the congregation with something specific to be or do in response to the Word. People are busy and do not have time or patience for a minister who indulges in much theoretical speculation.

And yet, after all these years of preaching, I wonder about that.

Yes, we are practical people who like sermons and worship services that can readily apply to our lives. But I am guessing that here on a Sunday morning, you might want more than simply some practical advice about life – three steps to a happy marriage, four ways to prosperity. I'm guessing that for a few moments you might want to rise above the distractions of daily life, to step away from the reassuring ordinariness of the everyday, and for a moment be overwhelmed with wonder as the veil between this world and the next, between here and eternity, between mundane reality as we normally experience it and some other wondrous reality is pulled back and made explicit and we see reality – truth - with new eyes. Again, no one will ever mistake me for a mystic, but more and more I find myself coming to worship with this prayer on my lips: "God, may this worship service be a thin place. May your beauty break through to me this day. Take me up on the mountain, light the fire, remove the veil, let there be light that I might shout, 'Lord, it is good that we should be here!'"

Trappist monk and mystic, Thomas Merton, who spent much of his adult life in a monastery in Kentucky from which he wrote many classic devotional materials, said this: "Life is this simple. We are

living in a world that is absolutely transparent and God is shining through all the time. This is not just a fable or a nice story. It is true. If we abandon ourselves to God and forget ourselves, we see it sometimes, and we see it maybe frequently. God shows God-self everywhere, in everything – in people and in things and in nature and in events. It becomes very obvious that God is everywhere and in everything and we cannot be without God. The only thing is that we don't see it." But there, on the mountain with Jesus, the disciples do see it. The story of Jesus' Transfiguration is not an historical event as much as it is worship, an experience of the divine, a vision of a new reality, or perhaps a vision of the way things really are.

Staying with Thomas Merton for a moment, he shared this story: "One afternoon in Louisville, on the corner of Fourth and Walnut, in the center of the shopping district, I was suddenly overwhelmed with the realization that I loved all these people, that they were mine and I was theirs, that we could not be alien to one another even though we were total strangers. I have the immense joy of being human, a member of the race in which God himself became incarnate. This is who we really are. If only everybody would understand this. But it cannot be explained. There is no way of convincing people that they are walking around shining like the sun!" In that moment, Merton was changed. He became aware, not just intellectually, but experientially, of the connectedness of everything. His sense of being "in here" while the world was "out there" momentarily disappeared. The veil was lifted and he found himself in a thin place, experiencing a new reality.

And that is what I hope we can take away from this story. Explain it – make sense out of it? No way! Not even going to try. All we can really do is proclaim it, relish it, enjoy it, draw hope from it and wonder at the sheer glory of it all. Just let the mystery bubble up and not rush to find an explanation. And maybe, just maybe, be changed.

A pastor shares a conversation he had when visiting another congregation on a Sunday: "I feel closer to God in the celebration of communion than in any other act of worship," she said. "I think the thing that makes our communion celebrations so special is not our beautiful building or even our beautiful music. It's the beautiful 200 sandwiches that we serve to the homeless around our church every day of the week. Those sandwiches transform our bread and wine into the body and blood of Christ."

Or this: "I once had a church member who was faced with the horribly difficult task of forgiving a person who had deeply, most unjustly wronged her. He was her ex-husband. She did not want to forgive him, resented and hated him with all her being, but her hatred for him and for what he had done to her and her family was ruining her life. I met with her and counseled her. I prayed with her for the power to forgive and to go on with her life, but she just couldn't. I had great sympathy for her because I knew that if I were her, I probably couldn't bring myself to forgive him either.

"Then one Sunday she emerged from church just beaming. I could see on her face that she had had a wonderful worship experience. She said to me as I stood at the door, 'I can do it! That last hymn gave me everything I need to do what God wants me to do.'" A hymn had changed her, given her a new vision and enabled her to forgive her worst enemy."

As much as they might have wanted to, the disciples discovered that they could not stay with Jesus on the mountain. And neither can we. But what a difference it can make when we are touched by his light and can see ourselves and everyone and everything else illuminated with that same light. What if Sunday enabled us to get up on Monday morning and see and hear what is hidden from Monday-only eyes and ears – that God is present and working and shining in every corner of life? This world would be a different place. I think of an old saying from the black Pentecostal church: "It ain't how high folks jump in church that makes 'em Christians. It's what they do when they hits the ground."

As one colleague has said, "In God's continual flirtation with the world, only rarely does God bowl us over, write some slogan across the sky in neon. More often, God quietly courts us, teases us, pulls back the curtain between today and eternity for only a peek. And when such a glimpse is given you, on a mountaintop or in a Sunday pew, cherish it, but don't even try to capture it, for it is a gift, a glimpse, a fleeting, blessed gift of revelation." How good of God to have given us this faith so strange, so wonderful, so true that we could never have thought it up by ourselves!