

The Transfiguration of Our Lord. February 11, 2018. Dungeness Valley Lutheran Church, Sequim, WA. 2 Kings 2:1-12. 2 Corinthians 4:3-6. Mark 9:2-9.

The beautiful Olympic Mountains help us imagine a bit of this amazing story. The highest peaks shine brilliant white in the snow. When you climb even partway up one of these high mountains, you gain a vision of the whole area below. You feel close to heaven. You rest to gain strength to climb back down. It's been a great experience.

When Bob, my spouse, climbed to the top of a pass in Tibet, years ago, he and his friends found hundreds of Buddhist prayer flags tied between sticks and draped over rocks. This was the closest anyone there would get to heaven on earth and that is where some people went to pray.

After Moses led the people of Israel out of Egypt and began to accompany them on their wanderings to the Promised Land, he went up Mt. Sinai to pray. There he encountered God. When Moses returned with the Ten Commandments on two stone tablets, he had to veil his face because it was so radiant with the reflection of God's presence.

Peter, James, John, and Jesus were going up a mountain to pray. Peter might have said, "I have been hanging out with Jesus for several years now. James and John and the others – we have watched him heal and listened to him preach. He's a great man. We have told him so to his face. He puzzles me when he talks of death – because he's really in his prime! Well, we went up on the mountain with him – just the four of us. We were going to pray when suddenly we were overcome. We just fell to the ground. He was glowing with an incredible light. Moses and Elijah, our great forefathers, were with him. We heard a voice from heaven and a cloud moved over us. I tell you, it was terrifying. NO one may see GOD and live. I thought we would die."

But they didn't die. The cloud lifted, the figures of Moses – giver of Israel's laws —and Elijah – great prophet of Israel – were gone. Peter, James and John saw ONLY JESUS.

ONLY JESUS

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Matthew, Mark, Luke, and Peter recorded this mysterious story for the early church. They drew parallels between the hero Moses going up the mountain and seeing God and their leaders Peter, James and John doing the same. They showed the connection between Jesus and Moses and Elijah. They told of the voice from heaven directing us to “listen” to Jesus, the “Son, the beloved.” They gave a foreshadowing of the resurrection when they have Jesus say, “Tell no one about this vision until after the Son of Man has been raised from the dead.”

The church continues to tell this story – not accidentally right before Ash Wednesday when we plunge into 6 weeks of Lenten discipline and preparation for Good Friday. For the early church – as for us today – the Transfiguration story is a glimpse of glory before the devastation of the crucifixion. A glimpse of the glory that will be shown to all on Easter Sunday – not just to 3 disciples, but all 11 plus many others and to all of us down through the ages. The mystery of this story, the mystery of the Easter story, the mystery we seek to capture in the words of creeds and prayers -- these things challenge our minds, but need not challenge our hearts. The point: God is present in amazing ways which we cannot comprehend. But God is life and light, God is wholeness, God is blazing goodness.

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There are many great and beautiful mountains where one can feel close to heaven and to God. There are also many horrible stinking mountains of garbage where one might think God is absent. But there one woman came to feel close to heaven and to God.

Brenda and Ruth climbed into a rattletrap church bus and headed out to serve supper on the edge of the huge city dump of Mazatlán. Piles of

garbage and abandoned furniture lined the dirt road, and everything was covered in a thick layer of dust. The smell was awful. People started lining up for food as soon as the bus pulled up. Along with the church members, they served more than a hundred of the dump scavengers. Brenda sat down to rest for a moment next to a man and they watched a rooster seeking scraps. After smiles and a few words in halting English and halting Spanish, Brenda offered him her hand, but he shook his head and showed her his hands saying, "too dirty." His hands were indeed covered in a thick black crust from long days of searching in the dump. When Brenda refused to be put off, the man slowly reached and grasped her hand. He raised a questioning eyebrow, smiled again, and wrapped both hands around hers. Brenda said, "God bless you" in Spanish. The man placed his "too dirty" hands on her head, and said in English, "God bless you."

As you know, many Hispanic men are named Jesús. Whether or not this man's mother had prayerfully named him Jesús we do not know, but that young man did what the man we call Jesus did: he offered God's blessing to another human being!

I don't think Brenda can willingly conjure up the smell of the garbage mountain, nor can she likely remember what the meal was that she helped serve the poor there, but her most poignant memory of that day is "Only Jesús, only Jesus." She saw Jesus in that man.

Only Jesus.

When Peter, James and John looked around after their vision on the mountain, they saw only Jesus. They then went with him down from the mountain to continue the work of teaching and healing. He would not live in a dwelling high above us; he came to be among us. His friends would follow him to the cross – albeit from a distance and later they would rejoice in his Easter blessings.

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Years ago I helped care for a frail old woman lying in a hospital bed surrounded by children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren. As chaplain, I had been asked to say a prayer for her last hours. But my prayer was tiny, small. Miss Selma, as this venerable matriarch was called, prayed for us all in a loud voice. The two words she had to say at this, the end of her life, were “Only Jesus, Only Jesus, Only Jesus.”

She saw no one but Jesus. We saw Jesus in her.

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Madeleine L’Engle spoke of the Transfiguration this way:

Suddenly they saw him the way he was,
the way he really was all the time,
although they had never seen it before,
the glory which blinds the everyday eye
and so becomes invisible. This is how
He was: radiant, brilliant, carrying joy
like a flaming sun in his hands.

This is the way he was – is – from the beginning,
and we cannot bear it. So he manned himself,
[came as man to us]; and there on the mountain
they saw him, really saw him, saw his light.

We all know that if we really see him, we die.

But isn’t that what is required of us?

Then, perhaps, we will see each other, too.^[1]

Seeing JESUS when we see one another is transfiguration. Each one radiant, beloved, and worth listening to and loving back. Amen.