

The Transfiguration of Our Lord

Luke 9:28-43a

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Encountering God directly is not for the faint of heart. The Hebrew people were afraid to approach Moses. They could see that his direct encounter with God had changed him in a visible and powerful way- he shone glory. In their tradition it was understood that a direct encounter with the divine was deadly and to a large degree this was and still is true. When we encounter the divine our old self passes away and a new self arises. Perhaps they, like us, would have preferred to remain as they were. To abate their fears Moses kept a veil over his face.

St. Paul also had a direct encounter with God when he was thrown from the horse as he was on the Road to Damascus (Acts 9:1-19). At that time he was known as Saul and was a violent persecutor of the church. Yet in a moment of blinding light he was slain by the divine and reborn anew in his baptism. Saul became Paul. Over the years he would mine this experience repeatedly, and in so doing would transform again into St. Paul the Apostle to the Gentiles.

In his 2nd Letter to the Corinthians St. Paul then suggests that we reflect upon our own encounters with the Lord. ¹⁸“And all of us, with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another.”

The Disciples of Jesus have an incredible encounter of the divine, but it would take them time to fully comprehend the full depth of the heavenly encounter. As an example we see that immediately following the Transfiguration of Jesus, they are back on “level ground” or “regular ground” and have seemingly left the holy behind on the mountain. As such they are unable to heal the boy with the unclean spirit. Jesus gets furious with them, “You faithless and perverse generation, how much long must I be with you and bear with you?” (Luke 9:40). They don’t yet understand that holiness and divine power are not relegated to select physical places but are transportable with the hearts of the righteous. As an aside, the church would come to understand this in the person of Jesus as he became the living center of Israel’s holiness as formerly found in the Temple itself (Bruce Chilton, *Rabbi Jesus*, page 194).

The Divine Encounter can happen to anyone at any time and in any place. Years ago I met a priest who was interviewing me to come serve as a seminarian apprentice at his church for two years. The relationship never came to pass because he accepted a call to serve in a different diocese, but I remember the meeting because of the story he told me. He had grown up in small town. His family lived on the boundary where farm fields abutted back yards. As a boy he would ride his bike on paths that skirted the edges of these back yards and fields. One day during his seventh or eighth year of life he felt something come over him. He stopped his bike, engaged the kick stand and then raised his arms in the Orans position and then dropped to his knees as the experience grew more intense. After a few minutes the sensation passed; he came back to himself and went on his way. Being a young boy he didn't really know the full meaning of the divine encounter but he mined it again and again through adolescence and young adulthood until he came to recognize it was God calling him to service. Even though it took years to articulate the meaning one thing was absolutely clear- God's holiness had enveloped him and he carried that reassurance with him from that time forward even to the moment wherein he was sharing the experience.

There is a popular saying heard on the news these days, "Never let a good political crisis go to waste". Without trying to be flippant, we could apply the same mildly adapted advice to our own lives, "Never let a good pastoral crisis go to waste". What I mean is pastoral crises are painful but they are also a means of divine encounters, if we can allow the holiness of God to wash over us and envelope us in those moments, we will be born anew. When we are emotionally raw and less concerned with the world's concerns we are also vulnerable to God's love for us. As we recover, too often we close the window of God and go back to the world's version of normal.

The lesson of the Transfiguration is that the "normal" we see in day to day is actually a veiled reality. The transfiguration of our Lord and other divine encounters show us the way things really are on the other side of the veil. These experiences are meant to encourage us because those visions, not the cares and worries of this world, are what will actually endure. *Amen.*