**SERMON- Glowing Faces**

*On the mountain, a man bent in prayer erupts in sudden light.  As glory leaks from every pore, three sleepy disciples cower in the grass and watch their Master glow.  Two figures appear out of time and space; in solemn tones they speak of exodus, accomplishment, Jerusalem.  The disciples, comprehending nothing, babble nonsense in response — "Let's make tents!  Let's stay here always! This is good!"  A cloud descends, thick and impenetrable.  As it envelops the disciples, they fall to their faces, certain the end has come.  But a Voice addresses them instead, tender and gentle. "This is my Son, my Chosen."  The Voice hums with delight, and the disciples, braver now, look up.  They gaze at their Master — the Shining One — and a Father's pure joy sings with the stars.  "This is my Beloved Son.  Listen to him."*

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*In the valley, a boy writhes in the dust.  He drools, he cannot hear, and his eyes — wide-open, feral — sees nothing but darkness.  Around him a crowd gathers and swells, eager for spectacle.  Scribes jeer, and disciples wring their hands in shame.  "Frauds!" someone yells into the night.  "Charlatans!"  "Where's your Master?" the scribes ask the disciples an umpteeth time.  "Why has he left you?"  "We don't know," the disciples mutter, gesturing vaguely at the mountain.  Panic wars with exhaustion as they hear the boy shriek yet again — an echo straight from hell.  He flails, and his limbs assault his stricken face.  A voice — strangled, singular — rends the night.  "This is my son!" a man cries out as he pushes through the crowd to gather the convulsing boy into his arms.  Everyone stares as the father cradles the wreck of a child against his chest.  "Please," he sobs to the stars.  "Please.  This is my beloved son.  Listen to him."1*

Today is Transfiguration Sunday. Yes, I know, not exactly a Hallmark Day, like Valentine’s Day that we are celebrating today. No cards or other reminders, except here on Sunday morning. A day that passes by without mention, except maybe in church. So, what’s the big deal? This day – actually this brief moment – is the high point of the season of Epiphany – the showing forth or revealing of Jesus as the Christ. We have walked through weeks of hints – a star, a dove, teaching and healing, raising from the dead. Now we stand here, in the light of the Beloved’s glory, hearing the very voice of God, once again.

I wonder if we can imagine this moment together… close your eyes for a minute as we are walking up the mountain with Jesus. I know all of us have a picture of him in our minds. It is a beautiful and sunny day; the sky is a piercing cobalt blue and a slight breeze softly blows against your face. The view is breathtaking, with the Galilean sea lying behind you and Jerusalem against the horizon. You are tired – but it is a good tired, that speaks of satisfaction and of peace. And as you sit down to rest, and Jesus kneels to pray you are startled awake. The light is almost too bright to bear, and you are sure that there are three figures now… is the light playing games with you, or is what you are seeing really more than that… And you don’t know what to do… it is so overwhelming, so unreal, so out of the realm of anything you ever experienced… The sun disappears and clouds envelops you as you hear a voice from… from where? You are in the presence of God’s Son – listen to him! And then, as soon as it started, it is over, and everything looks like it did just a few short moments ago…

We are so quick to jump on Peter, with Luke’s statement: “he did not know what he was saying”. Peter, always stumbling over his own feet, to put his foot in his mouth. But what exactly would you have done? Take cover and hide, thinking that this is the end of the world? Rub your eyes again and again, wondering if it was a dream or if it really happened? Blabbering some non-sensical words, as you are trying to come to terms with what just happened? Are we so quick to judge Peter because we see ourselves mirrored in his reaction?

Maybe Peter now realizes how true the statement he made eight days ago – the one about Jesus being the Messiah, the Son of God, really was true. Yes, he meant it, but did he realize the implications of “taking up your cross” and following Jesus? I wonder if Peter realized the true divinity of Jesus before this moment. This man that they walked with for months, all around Galilee, hanging out with people that Peter would not touch with a ten-foot pole. He was an observing Jew, after all. Even after seeing Jesus’s healings and miracles, hearing him preach, the one who would finally save them from Rome’s oppression, did they really get that this was the true Son of God… God incarnate… the real deal?

What do you do when you finally experience God in all his glory? Maybe tame it down a little and domesticate it to make it a little less scary and fit into our own world a little bit better. Or maybe, once you have been on the mountaintop, experienced the truly thin place where God is closer than a touch, you would like to hang out there for a while – stay and live in the awesome presence of God, rather than returning to what was. Maybe Peter just did not want this Jesus to go through with what he just overheard in the conversation with Moses and Elijah, to keep him in this world, instead of leaving. What do you do when you are God-smacked?

Think about it… the times we live in. The times where it feels so much like God is absent – that we are abandoned to deal with our problems, even though impossible, all by ourselves? Wouldn’t it be nice to just get a break for a moment? A break from the masks and the illness; from the news predicting still worse as the number of deaths continue to climb. From the political discourse and the division; the pain and suffering of the world around us- kids going hungry, financial difficulty, loneliness, despair, suicide and addiction. Just for a moment, for everything to be perfect, even though it is not quite comprehensible, and we blabber things that makes no sense. To be completely enfolded in God’s glory?

The disciples and Jesus descended the mountain in silence… I am sure that Jesus’ mind was on the conversation he just had and what was lying ahead for him. And I am sure that the disciples were just plain overwhelmed, not knowing how to even begin to find the words to describe what they have just witnessed, if they even knew what they witnessed. And then there was the voice… “this is my Chosen, my Beloved – listen to him!” Listen to him!! The imperative that extends all the way from that mountain top long ago to all our present-day valleys, plains, cities, towns, neighborhoods, and homes.

Down in the valley, where that same time was spent by the remaining nine in anxious futility, trying in vain to do their Master's good work… Down back to the breeding ground of despair and doubt of an anguished father and his broken son, suffering for hours, even as the heavens broke open above their heads. Down in the valley where people were still experiencing the ache of God’s absence… where God’s glory has not basked them in light.

I wonder when the last time was when you experienced God this way, standing in absolute awe, at a loss for words? When last were you so close, so in tune, that your face shone or that all you wanted to do was to linger a little longer and bask in that presence? Was it in God’s creation - in a beautiful sunrise or the slight tinge of purple as the sun goes down before evening falls? In the fresh green of a perfect spring day, the world returning to life. In the unexpected phone call from a friend when we need it most, the smile of a stranger and the giggle that bubbles up from kids playing on the floor. In worship and in our own moments of stillness and prayer, where we can bare our souls.

Moses’ face shone when he came down from the mountain with God’s law. His face reflected that of God - as if God’s glory rubbed off on him. Down in the valley of golden calves and rituals. Down in the valley of people lost, scared and frustrated with God’s and Moses’ absence.

Maybe that is why transfiguration Sunday is so important. Yes, Jesus was transformed on the mountain – for a moment. Yes, we would like to stay and experience God’s glory for a little while. But in the end, my friends, we need to hear the voice - “This is my Chosen, listen to him!” Listen to him, as we, ourselves transformed by the experience of glory, pick up our own cross and follow Jesus. As we, ourselves, our faces shining for the world to see, return to the muck and mess and valley where people are hurting, longing for God’s presence, and find it in us.

The transfiguration story is about Jesus being chosen, blessed, and anointed by God to go back down into the valley where the real pain of real life resides. With the people who are fighting to stay alive against the powers of drugs and alcohol, and pain, and oppression, and disease, and racism, and sexism, and age, and hunger, and poverty, and fear, and all the rest of the demons that haunt humanity, who need the healing touch of Jesus, and us, the Church, in order to move forward and find life.

The world needs people and churches that glow – not with the dead words of doctrine and tired rituals – but vibrant messages, fully alive spiritual leaders, dancing children and working hands. Churches and people that glow in the valleys of pain and suffering. So, I pray today, that we truly experience the full glory of God in our lives – not just for our own comfort and strength, but to go live the light of the mountaintop as we listen, follow and bring God’s presence into the valley.

1. Debie Thomas, Journey with Jesus, January 31, 2016. [Journey with Jesus - The View from the Valley](https://www.journeywithjesus.net/essays/813-the-view-from-the-valley)