

Trinity Episcopal Church, Statesboro, GA

Last Sunday after the Epiphany

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Let's talk about transfiguration not only as depicted in the gospel reading but what it means within our own lives...how we are transformed or transfigured.

I recently finished reading a book by a journalist, Rodney Barker entitled "Hiroshima Maidens". The book is an account beginning with the moment the A bomb was dropped on Hiroshima and follows the journey of twenty-five school age girls from Japan to Mt. Sinai Hospital in NYC. They had suffered disfiguring scars on their face and arms; the intense heat contorted their arms and hands to such an extent that they were useless. In Japan, they were referred to as the hibakusha which meant "explosion-affected people", a reference that was not entirely positive but designated them as outcast and unacceptable to any suitor.

Under the auspices of Norman Cousins, the Editor-in-Chief of the Saturday Review and a group of Quakers et al, they were flown to the United States in 1955 and went through extensive plastic surgeries at Mt. Sinai Hospital. When not at the hospital, they lived with families in and around NYC. The girls had many reactions to their new surroundings and they had no preconceived idea that the physicians would be able to restore their appearance to the way it had been prior to August 6, 1945. But they were transfigured just the same.

The notion of "philanthropy" was a foreign concept to them. "It was an alien cultural and philosophical concept in Japan." The girls could not understand why they were being treated the way they were by strangers and people who were their enemies not too many years ago. Helen Yokoyama was their translator but more than that she was their sensei (sin-say) or teacher and had accompanied them into this strange land. She gave them this to think about: "Suppose that some people have a philosophy of life which enables them to regard all human beings as belonging to a single family...the same love that members of a family feel for one another can be felt by these people for all others, especially those who are terribly in need of help. Is this not possible?"

"You mean that these people are helping me because they love me?"

"I believe they do." And in this love the girls were transformed. "The experience of being cared for and made to feel wanted had brought out a creative growth in their response to life and other people. Being loved had re-established their own capacity for loving."

It was a transforming event. And all of us at some point in our lives can recall one or more moments when we have felt changed...transfigured. In today's Gospel reading, we hear how the disciples had such a moment. Their experience was a little bit more stupendous; the cast were comprised of noted and recognizable figures that reflected a history of a people and a religion. But it was a moment where they, too, were moved from one reality to another. And realized that their lives would be changed forever.

N. T. Wright, in his book, Simply Christian, refers to these events as the place where heaven and earth meet; a place where, like on the mountain top, they overlap and interlock. N. T Wright describes the moment this way: "A great door has swung open in the Cosmos which can never again be shut. It's the door to the prison where we've been kept chained up. We are offered freedom: freedom to experience God's rescue for ourselves, to go through the open door and explore the new world to which we now have access. In particular, we are all invited – summoned, actually – to discover, through following Jesus,

that this new world is indeed a place of justice, spirituality, relationship, and beauty, and that we are not only to enjoy it as such but to work at bringing it to birth on earth as in heaven." I was this same "open door" through which the twenty-five school-aged girls walked through.

On the mountain, Jesus is inviting us, too, to share in his humanity and his divinity. Jesus is the point where heaven and earth meet, where they interlock and overlap; and we are beneficiaries of this transfiguration, the moment when Jesus steps out and a voice declares that he is truly the Son of God, born into our world, to share our human nature and overwhelm us and save us through His divinity and his love.

Frederick Buechner describes the Transfiguration moment and what it means to us, this way. "Even with us something like that happens once in a while. The face of a man walking his child in the park, of a woman picking peas in the garden, of sometimes even the unlikeliest person listening to a concert, say, or standing barefoot in the sand watching the waves roll in, or just having a beer at a Saturday baseball game in July. Every once and so often, something so touching, so incandescent, so alive transfigures the human face that it's almost beyond bearing."

Now, I have a hospice story. He was but 65 years old. He had been raised in abject poverty in the hills of northern Alabama. The troubled times far outnumbered the good times. He could not write but he could read and he read voraciously. He was "rough around the edges" and he admitted that he was not happy and that was the rule and not the exception. He smoked too much and did not listen to anything anyone told him. He was a Native American and proud of it. He lived alone and found comfort in the solitude. When he died, he died quietly, silently, and except for the hospice staff, by himself; he died as he lived. But there was a look on his face of that "peace that passes all understanding". Or as Buechner says: "Something so touching, so incandescent, so alive transfigures the human face that it is almost beyond bearing". I truly believe that he came to be at the mountain top with Jesus, a point of Transfiguration....a moment that he realized that he too was loved.

In today's reading from Matthew, God speaks to the disciples directly. He tells them that this is His son in whom He is well pleased. And God says: "Listen to Him". At the point of death, the patient had a look of relief and of contentment. I believe that God was talking to this unhappy, quiet man up to his last breath and final heart beat; and he "listened to Him" and at death was transfigured.

From Mary Cox Garner's book, The Hidden Souls of Words, she relates the following story: "The little child whispered, 'God, speak to me!' And a meadowlark sang. But the child did not hear. So the child yelled, 'God speak to me!' And the thunder rolled across the sky. But the child did not listen. The child looked around and said, 'God let me see you!' And a star shone brightly. But the child did not notice. And the child shouted, 'God, show me a miracle!' And a life was born. But the child did not know. So the child cried out in despair, 'Touch me, God, and let me know you are here!' Whereupon, God reached down and touched the child. But the child brushed the butterfly away unknowingly. The writer goes on to suggest that we "take time to listen. Often times, the things we seek are right underneath our noses. Don't miss out on your blessings because they are not packaged the way you expect."

I get so caught up into the usual distractions of daily living that I too do not allow myself to be open to the presence of God. I do not find that safe harbor where the winds are not howling and the waves are not crashing; I do not allow myself the time and inclination to stop and listen and stop and feel and to stop and see, really see the presence of God. The transfiguration was not a one time event. It is all around us and in us. We are continuously being summoned to that place where we too may be transfigured.

May we, during the approaching Lenten season, find that place of calm and peace and quietude in which we may be transfigured by the voice and presence of God and, in turn, share the experience with others. Whether from a stranger or a friend; or from a loved one or even an adversary; or in the midst of a crowd or in solitude; or the gentle touch of a hand or the countenance of a face; may we, to paraphrasing the words of 2 Peter, be attentive and transformed “as a light shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in our hearts.”

AMEN