

February 22, 2009
The Transfiguration: Called to Wonder
2 Kings 2:1-12
Mark 9:2-9

Today is the feast day, of the Transfiguration of Jesus. This day and celebration have much to do with us, even though at first glance the story may seem to be of a wondrous experience that happened long ago. Our lord's life and light that he gave permeate the universe.

Mark places the Transfiguration of Jesus toward the end of his life; right after Jesus had asked his disciples who he is, told them that the Son of Man must suffer, and warned that anyone who follows him must take up the cross, and lose his or her life in order to find it.

This is a moment that shows Jesus glorified, as though already exalted to heaven. Jesus is shot through with radiance, with light, his clothes whiter than anything ever bleached. Moses and Elijah are there, too, even though they had died hundreds of years before. Moses represents the law (Torah) and Elijah (prophets): the law and prophets together the whole Hebrew biblical teaching. The presence of Moses and Elijah testify that Jesus is the Christ, the long awaited one. The story to say nothing of the experience itself for Jesus and the disciples was shot through with meaning and mystery. The disciples want to do something; capture the experience, do something, such as make three dwellings, three tents or tabernacles (probably the memory of when during the Exodus God met Moses in a tent of meeting, when God traveled and lived with the people). They wanted to prolong this wonderful experience, and who could blame them. They were overcome with a combination of bewilderment, awe, hope and nervousness bordering on anxiety. (Human beings can't stand too much reality, as the poet TS Eliot puts it). Jesus then hears similar words said at the baptism, "You are my beloved son; with you I am well pleased." Here at the end of his ministry, the same words of love: "This is my beloved son;" but with the addition to the three disciples (and to the whole world): "listen to him."

And the disciples, Jesus tells them to tell no one of what they just saw: Jesus with Moses and Elijah; did Jesus know (what we find in real life) that in telling something that brought us great joy and understanding, the awe and even joy would disappear, and the pride would appear. They needed to go back to real life, holding this secret within. But, what a secret!

We, too, hold a secret. The same secret:

Paul, the missionary, who wrote to those Christians in the city of Corinth, where he had established them as the church, wrote: "For it is the God who said, 'Let light shine out of darkness,' who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. But we have this treasure in clay jars so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us." (2 Corinthians 4: 5-7)

After our Lord's death and resurrection, and our baptism into his light, we and all Christians for all time (and perhaps many more people as well, for God's love is far beyond our knowing) have this light in our hearts. Sometimes, often hidden; we don't feel it. Life can seem dark and ordinary. Treasure in clay jars.

The Eastern Orthodox Church—Russian and Greek orthodox—sees light all around. Eastern Christians, in Greece and Russia, believe that we are all growing in the light, through divinization, each of us becoming divine!..

The icon is one example of the understanding of the Transfiguration, since the 6th century. Like many paintings mosaics, showing Jesus floating, glorified above Mt. Tabor, with Elijah and Moses to his left and right, and sleeping disciples below. But the disciples, huddled below Jesus, as though they can't bear the light, gradually grow to take in light. In the Eastern church: *theosis*; the lighting, or illumination of the Christian, beginning with the sacrament of baptism. The baptized person called the "newly illumined one," and his or her life purpose is to live as Jesus taught so that his or her individual divine spark will become a brilliant flame symbolizing the glowing white light surrounding Jesus. All of this meaning is behind our use of white vestments today.

What is a way of living that helps brighter our light: and let's our little light shine?

I think something that is not talked about often enough is the importance of encouraging in ourselves and children as sense of wonder!

In his book *This Sunrise of Wonder* (London, 1995), Michael Mayne writes to his grandchildren: "If I could have waved a fairy grandfather's wand at your birth and wished upon you just one gift it would not have been beauty or riches or a long life; it would have been the gift of wonder."

We've had these times, haven't you, when something seemed wondrous, but maybe you didn't think of these times and the wonder you felt as meaning that Christ's light shines around you.

The beautiful lights of a Christmas tree. A beautiful dawn morning. A new bicycle.

When you fell and love and realized that that love was returned?

When you're out sledding or skiing and see probably 1,000 snowflakes on your mitten and your friend tells you she has just learn that ever snowflake in the world that ever fell or will fall looks different?

When you see for the first time the head and feet of your newborn child.

When you read astonishing facts, which are really miracles: such as this: that every day we think about 50,000 different thoughts?

That there are 70,000 million million million stars in the universe; which is ten times as many stars as grains of sand on all the world's beaches and deserts.

That just last week scientists documented 7,500 species in the Antarctic and 5,500 in the Arctic, places where scientists had thought were biological deserts?

The first cup of coffee in the morning, a glass of wine at dinner. Hiking, climbing hard, and with sweat streaming into our eyes, seeing with a gasp the vista below our feet, having reached the mountain top. We wake up after a bad dream, we are healed after our illness, a friendship is restored after forgiveness, and strong arms hold us.

All of these and millions of other seemingly more ordinary miracles are shot through with God's glory and light.

They can happen anywhere, anytime, and we can't often make it happen. The Catholic monk, writer, and peace activist Thomas Merton said "In Louisville, at the corner of Fourth and Walnut, I was suddenly overwhelmed with the realization that I love all these people, that they were mine and I theirs. It was like waking from a dream of separateness to take your place as a member of the human race. If only everybody could realize this. But it cannot be explained. There is no way of telling people that they are all walking around shining like the sun."

How do we nourish wonder?

Read poets: the Roman Catholic priest and poet Gerard Manley Hopkins: "nature is never spent...and that the Holy Ghost broods over the world with warm breast and bright wings."

The very end of Dante's great poem, the Divine Comedy, ends with the great vision of "the love that moves the sun and the stars."

When we look at the stars at night, can we see or feel the love? Can we pause between all the things on our "to do" list to become for the moment a human being, rather than a human "doing"?

It's good to practice in prayer or in becoming a person of wonder to not hold to God too tightly with our reason, or our doing. Holding a big enough space between us and God, which is what wonder and prayer do.

Following our Lord, which we do together, is sometimes following an inner voice that gently encourages us: look, listen, pay attention! Be astonished. And, see the light shining in your own heart.