

The Transfiguration      St Martha's, Bethany Beach      Sunday, February 14, 2021

2 Kings 2:1-12

Psalm 50:1-6

2 Cor 1:18-22

Mark 9:2-9

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

I used to live in one of the most beautiful areas of Sussex - and by that I mean, not Sussex, Delaware, but Sussex, England. I lived in the village of Coldwaltham, where I served for two years as a curate. Coldwaltham has a pub, a school, a church, and not much else. It's the kind of place you drive through on your way to somewhere else. But for those of us who stopped there, it was a special place, more for the surroundings than for the actual village itself. The countryside possessed a varied beauty I have yet to encounter anywhere else. I had a nickname for this area - I called it "Eden."

The countryside was a gift to aspiring preachers, especially the kind who get their inspiration from walking in areas of natural beauty. The names of the places where I walked are like familiar friends: the Lord's Piece; Hesworth Common; Wild Brooks. It was in the Wild Brooks one day, when I was out walking, that I had an experience that was like heaven opening up a window and allowing me to look inside.

The Wild Brooks is not a very large area. It sits in a kind of basin, surrounded by hills. There is a field, and a small lake, and a river that runs through it - the Arun. There are always birds around, some of whom nestle in the reeds in the lake. Occasionally cattle wander through the field, and on more than one occasion I had to negotiate my way past the cows.

It was a Wednesday, a late afternoon walk on a drab winters day. The sky was overcast, and through the clouds the pale sunlight fell upon the gray water and wind-bleached grass. Although the light was dim, the scene had a stark beauty, of a landscape wearing its winter clothes. As I walked along four ducks took to the air at great speed, and I watched them as they skillfully wove in and out of each other's flight paths.

For a moment I stood on the path and gazed at the winter scene. Then, unexpectedly, everything changed. Through a gap in the clouds, the low winter sun raked its beam across the basin. The effect was to transform a scene of cold beauty into one of dazzling brilliance. The whole area was transformed by light. The bleached grass and dull trees became golden with light, the water lost its grayness and became a pool of light; everything was illuminated by the sunlight breaking through the clouds. I even became a part of it myself, as the sun moved across the fields and caught me in its beam.

I stood motionless, watching it all, until, after about a minute, the gap in the clouds closed, and, as if a curtain had been drawn, the scene resumed its former colorless, winter aspect.

What had I seen? Two realities, it seemed, although in fact it wasn't two; it was one. I had seen the same water, the same trees, the same grass. And yet in that minute, when the light broke through and transformed the scene before me, I saw them differently.

I carry this memory around with me, because it helps me to understand that my perception of what is real and what is not, goes beyond what I think I know. So, if I look at the same scene, it is possible to see it in two different ways. On that dull Wednesday afternoon, God painted the landscape in a golden light, myself included. That this experience occurred four days before this gospel reading, indicates to me that God had something in mind - a sermon for the curate to preach on Sunday.

Let's recount our gospel story. Jesus and his disciples Peter, James and John climb up the mountain, to a remote place where they are apart - usually when Jesus does this, he is needing to pray. When they reach the mountain-top an unusual thing happens. We read "He was transformed before them, and his clothes became dazzling white, such as no-one on earth could bleach them. And there appeared to them Elijah with Moses, who were talking with Jesus."

This is the story of the Transfiguration. Peter, James and John have just witnessed something extraordinary: their Lord and Master transfigured before them. They are now a long way from what they thought they knew. The Transfiguration is about two worlds, which in reality is one world. There is the world with which the disciples are familiar: the world of people and things, of families and fishing boats. Now, through God's revelation, they discover another world: the world of God in glory, shining brilliantly before their eyes.

Two worlds which, as I say, happen to be one world. The only division between the two occurs in our perception, in the way that we see it. How then do we reconcile the disparity in our own perception, when faced with this kind of double vision? We are familiar with the everyday Jesus in the gospels, but less so with the purely divine Jesus of the Transfiguration. The Orthodox Christian Church describes the Jesus of the Transfiguration as displaying God's uncreated light. Three humble Galileans were fortunate to be given a glimpse of this light.

It is in the Orthodox Church that our richest insights can be found for this event. Let me read you one by St Gregory Palamas:

"The Light of our Lord's Transfiguration had neither beginning nor end; it remained unbounded in time and space and imperceptible to the senses, although seen by bodily eyes...but by a change in their senses the Lord's disciples passed from the flesh to the Spirit".

The Transfiguration is a spiritual event, and the three disciples experience this event in a spiritual way - but not wholly spiritual, since the practically minded Peter offers to build three booths for Jesus, Moses and Elijah. However, what God has revealed to the disciples is that the spiritual element in their own lives is far greater and more profound than they had previously realized. This is deliberate, because when they begin their ministries, they will be acting not out of a sense of needing to do good, or of changing people's lives for the better, although that is in part true. No, primarily they will be ministering out of a sense of their own spiritual knowledge and understanding. They will be drawing water from the well of their own spiritual life - a well far deeper than they had

imagined. Every day they will carry in their minds the memory of what they saw on the mountain. It will inform every word they utter, and every deed that they undertake.

I spoke earlier of my experience out on the Wild Brooks. How everything was transformed although nothing was changed. That's one way of understanding the Transfiguration: Jesus underwent no change on that mountain-top - the change occurred in the perception of the disciples, who for a time received the power to see their Master as He really is, resplendent in the eternal light of his Godhead.

Today is the last Sunday before Lent. Lent is traditionally a time of repentance; literally, a time of "turning around". Perhaps in our turning around this year we may catch a glimpse of the glorious light of Christ. In asking to make amends for our sins, we pray that he will illumine the darkest corners of our lives, and bring everything into his own glorious light, so that our lives may be transformed into the glory of his own everlasting light, who lives and reigns with the Father, and the Holy Spirit, unto the ages of ages.

Amen.

Father David Beresford