

February 22, 2004
Last Sunday after Epiphany/Transfiguration
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Jesus' Transfiguration and Ours

- Isaiah 43:18-21 *I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?*
- 2 Cor. 3:12-18 *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; for this comes from the Lord, the Spirit.*
- Luke 9:28-43 *And while he was praying, the appearance of his face changed...Now Peter and his companions were weighed down with sleep....*

Today is Transfiguration Sunday. We hear the story of Jesus going up on an unnamed mountain to pray. While praying he is transfigured; his appearance changes so that he “glows.” The sleepy disciples are enveloped in a cloud, and God tells them to listen to Jesus. The disciples have not been doing too well at this. If we carefully read the gospel stories, we find that the disciples never quite get it. They aren’t really listening to Jesus. For listening means being so present in the moment that we give full attention to something. Such attentiveness brings an understanding so full that it shapes who we are and how we live. With the disciples, sometimes they get it, but then forget it. We are to see ourselves in the disciples. It is hard to pay attention, to really listen. The spiritual life means paying so close attention to Jesus that we are transformed in our living.

This story is about the kind of listening that is at the core of the life of faith. It is the quieting of our minds and hearts so that we are as attentive, open and receptive as we can be. This kind of listening is prayer in the fullest sense. When we cultivate this kind of listening, this kind of prayer, we find ourselves becoming evermore wide-awake. We have no trouble hearing what God is saying to us through Christ about who we are and what we are to be about.

This kind of spiritual alertness deepens our understanding of the interconnectedness of our lives and the life of the world. We come to see the connection between our own violence and violence in the world, between our own lack of love and the lack of love in the world, our own injustice toward others and injustice in the world. When we are engaged

in the kind of presence and listening that is prayer, then we are on the journey of our own transfiguration, our own transformation. As Paul says we are “being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory into another.” (2 Cor. 3:18) We discover the truth that the world is transformed as we are transformed. Why? Because we are part of the world. We are so intertwined with life that everything around us affects us, changes us. Just so, when we are changed we change life around us. When Jesus teaches people that they need to change and live according to God’s new order, God’s kingdom, he is saying that the transformation of the world begins with our own transformation. If we are trying to change the world and we are not changed people, then what we do is short-lived and rings hollow. So listening to Jesus in prayer, meditation, study, and self-awareness leads to our own transformation and thus the transforming of the world around us.

In prayer Jesus “glows” with awareness of God and God’s purposes in his life. The sleeping disciples are not glowing. This is an important image. Jesus is wide-awake in prayer and radiates his intimacy with God. In prayer, which is full awareness, we too “glow,” as it were, with God’s presence. Prayer is not just talking to God, voicing our concerns and needs. Prayer is being present in the moment, with minds and hearts that have become quiet enough to listen. Prayer is not withdrawal from the world or life, though we need to withdraw for prayer. We withdraw from life’s confusion and chaos, even the world of human needs that call for our attention so that we become aware of who we are and what we are being called to do. We withdraw in order to receive something so that we have something to offer. On retreat at a monastery, a friend was told by a monk: “You cannot give what you do not have.” If we are trying to give to others what we ourselves don’t have—peace, love, compassion, comfort, strength—then we are not doing much good. If we are trying to help others find their lives and we don’t know who we are, what good are we doing? If we want others to awaken to their relationship with God and our own relationship with God is unattended and faint, what do we have to offer? If we want to change the injustice, violence, hate, and lack of compassion in the world, how can we do it if we still harbor such things subtly in our own hearts and minds? We cannot wake up until we realize we are asleep.

I think we have all known someone who is spiritually awake, who has cultivated a listening heart and mind. On Sunday mornings at the church I served in Indiana, I would look out over the congregation. The view was often discouraging. Faces dull or tense or detached from what was going on. Faces revealing a lack of prayer, of any time alone with God. But there was also a young girl whose presence I always felt. She was tuned in to everything about worship. She held her hymnal firmly and sang with full engagement. She watched my every move and

listened as closely as she could to my sermons. She participated in communion as one who really knew that Jesus was present in our sharing. This young girl's face had that glow about it--the glow of being fully present, of being connected with God, of being open and receptive, the glow of being spiritually "all ears." Here in our midst was a young disciple fully awake. Young children are closer to God than we are. Their spirits have not yet been laden with all the things that have put us to sleep. I don't think many in the congregation noticed this girl's countenance. Those who did, however, found themselves changed. They saw what it means to glow as human beings in touch with God our Creator. Yes, a little child can lead us.

The disciples wake up enough to see Jesus' transfiguration. Peter responds in a muddle-headed, half-sleep way. He sees Moses and Elijah standing with Jesus. They represent the past that affirms yet gives way to the present. Peter is dazzled the scene. Like many of us, Peter just couldn't keep quiet and listen. He had to say something, and it came out rather inane: "Master, it's so-o-o nice to be here!" In fact, it's so-o-o nice, let's build some booths, some tents around you and Moses and Elijah. Let's make a religious festival, something to preserve this moment, this spiritual experience.

Peter was babbling on, covering up the silence, the power of that present moment. There is something in his response that wants to nail things down, that wants to cling to the past. There is also something about turning faith into a spiritual "experience" rather than a relationship with the living God that awakens us to every present moment. Having a spiritual experience is not the same thing as living the life of faith. If we are seeking "experiences" then we are not listening but projecting what we want to hear, to see, to feel. Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote that God is not the God of emotions but of truth (Life Together, p. 27). Faith is more than feelings, even religious ones. Otherwise we would always be at the mercy of the ups and downs of our emotional life. Peter wants to cling to the experience and wants to make it last. It is then that the voice from the cloud speaks: "This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!" Wake up! Pay attention! God's words through Isaiah serve as a backdrop to this whole story: "Do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old. I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?" Spiritual alertness enables us to see and be part of the new things that God is doing in us, in others, in the world.

What might all of this say to us, the Church of the Covenant? It raises two important issues. First, are we really taking seriously and committing ourselves to the life of prayer? Not to fulfill a religious requirement. Not so that we will appear to be serious Christians. But so that we are truly present to God. So that we undergo our own transfiguration, our transformation. The season of Lent begins this week,

a good time to renew our practice of daily prayer, making time each day to be alone with God so that we wake up to our life in God.

The second important issue, which flows from the first, is whether or not we are awake enough to see, be part of, and celebrate the new things God is doing now. Are we clinging to and living in the past--past experiences of faithfulness, past commitments, past missions? Please understand that we, like any other community of faith, we have in us the tendency to live in the past and not recognize the new things God is doing.

Last fall Jan and Joy Linn visited us. After lunch in the Lodge that Sunday, we had a time of sharing with them about their church, Spirit of Joy Christian Church, and ours. Jan made a statement that both puzzled and troubled me. He said, as one who has known this community for many years, that he perceived that the light had grown dim. Certainly there was a dimming of the light with Bev Cobsy's death. But can this dimness be also that we are still clinging to the past or trying to repeat the past in the present? This troubled me because it was in part true. However, I was puzzled as well, for I see new life, new things that God is doing. The L'Arche mission readying to begin construction on its home for a community of Assistants and Core Members. The Chrysalis Community Mission Group working with its call to be a resource for the inward journeys of individuals and our community. The Festival Center Mission Group working with God's call to make a place for community in the inner city. The movements of God's spirit I am seeing in individuals' lives, you who are seeking to grow in spiritual depth and practice. The new people who have been and will be drawn to this particular way of being the church, to a life of commitment and intentional spiritual growth, who will bring new and different gifts and callings.

If we can be honestly aware that we are asleep, then we can wake up. That's what confession is about: recognizing our spiritual slumber so that we can wake up. It is about letting go of the past so that we can come alive in the present, alive to God and the movements of God's spirit in and around us.

Are we praying like Jesus, to be fully present with God? Are we practicing each day the kind of presence that awakens us to the new things God is doing in others and ourselves? If we are praying toward the simple end of being in the present moment where we are met by God and by the living Christ, then we will "glow" like Jesus on the mountain of transfiguration. It will be our own transfiguration because we are becoming better able to hear the word of new life God is speaking to us. Then our eyes will be opened so that we see the new things God is about to do and is already doing in us.