

I have told you this story before, but I think it is worth repeating.

When I worked at First Lutheran Church in Muskegon, Michigan, Pastor Bill Uetrict and I would go and lead worship at the local nursing home once a month. I loved those monthly, afternoon services. The residents, whose bodies and minds had been devoured by the effects of aging, often unable to comprehend or communicate much of anything, would come alive in beautiful ways as we experienced worship together. I remember one dear lady whose name was Savannah. She was a wheel chair bound, 94-year-old African American woman whose body and mind suffered greatly, broken from the ravages of old age. I remember Savannah because, at one of those treasured worship experiences, she spontaneously and surprisingly burst into song, gifting us with her vocal rendition of the Lord's Prayer. Now, as a trained musician, I love quality performances and thought I knew what beauty was. However, as this very feeble old woman sang this prayer with her aged, weak, scratchy, shaking voice, I heard one of the most beautiful offerings I will ever hear. It was a moment of **transcendent** beauty, a sacred moment in time when the light of Jesus became so brilliant and so very present. In that holy moment, I was changed.

That experience comes to mind every time I read today's gospel story because, once in a while, we are able to get a new view of reality and a glimpse of God's transforming power. Once in a while, God breaks into our lives, transforms **our** understanding and changes or refashions **our** world.

In today's gospel reading Jesus takes Peter, James and John up on a mountain to pray. As they were climbing the mountain, I can imagine what the disciples might have been thinking, "Ugh!! What is he doing now? Maybe, if we pray, we can forget about what Jesus has just been telling us." You see, Jesus has just asked his disciples, "Who do people say that the Son of Man is?" The disciples answered with the names of great prophets, figures of faith from the past, names that would evoke respect and loyalty among their people. Jesus then asked them, "But who do you say that I am?" And, Peter, the one who quickly reacts to almost everything, got the answer right this time by saying, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the Living God." Jesus then went on to communicate the path of suffering servanthood that would lie ahead for God's Messiah and **all** who come after him.

Well, they were puzzled, disturbed and **uncomfortable**, to say the least. Death and suffering were not what they expected from a Messiah. They expected a Messiah who would enter the scene with pomp and glory.

You see, they thought they had the Messiah figured out. They had already created a box into which this Savior, this Messiah, would conveniently fit. In their minds, they had created a Messiah who would meet **their** expectations and **their** understanding of the way life should be.

Anyway, today we find them climbing a mountain with Jesus. And, in the Bible, big, interesting, surprising things happen on mountain tops. Remember, God had spoken to Moses on top of the mountain. Elijah was in a cave on a mountain when he experienced God in the stillness. So, in today's story, something **really big** and extraordinary happens on top of the mountain. As Jesus prays, two other people appear, Moses and Elijah, two of the great prophets. Jesus' face suddenly changes and his clothes become a brilliant, dazzling white. Jesus is transfigured and they experience and become enveloped by the presence of God. The disciples not only see Jesus in a new light, they see Jesus **talking** with Moses and Elijah. This was most unusual indeed!

Now, you gotta love Peter. He is so reactive. He frequently just jumps in and speaks before he really thinks about what he is saying. Quite often, he does not seem to have enough sense to just listen. And, today, he remains true to character. Today, Peter begins to babble and, of all things, offers to start a building program! He suggests they put up tents to

preserve the experience. Peter reacts and wants to DO something when all he really **needs** to do is be *still* and listen. But, as he babbles, the disciples become buried in a cloud and they hear a voice say, “This is my beloved Son, **listen** to him.” Then, after they hear this voice, they see Jesus alone and become speechless! Yes, this was an experience of something big. It was an experience of the presence of God.

Jesus called the disciples to a place where they were uncomfortable. He called them to a change in their understanding of God, and he reminded them to be unafraid. I have to say that quite often, we church folks are like Peter, James and John and the rest of the disciples. We are stubbornly adverse to change. Whether conversation centers around the choice of hymns, the style of liturgy, or the church’s race and gender politics, there is ample evidence to suggest we have become comfortable in our silos of privilege and tradition. The truth of the matter is that we who are Christians have become over-familiar with the gospel readings and traditions. We have tried to domesticate and diminish them — to tame the ineffable, trivialize the indescribable, to cut and trim God down to **our** size so that **we** can manage God. Today, our gospel reading challenges all the ways we attempt to domesticate and tame the Gospel. It challenges all the ways we try to make the Gospel comfortable in our lives. The blinding light and the

voice from the clouds challenge **our** faith that has often turned tepid, obligatory, and even bored.

Today's gospel reading marks a pivotal point in Jesus' ministry and it was a pivotal point in the lives of the three disciples. As we come to the end of the season of Epiphany, a time when we have been opening our eyes and ears to the way God shows God's very self to the world, it is a pivotal point for us. Today marks that point in the church year when we open the doorway to Lent and begin our Lenten journey. Jerusalem and the cross stand before us. This Wednesday, we will be reminded of our brokenness and mortality as we are smeared with ashes and begin traveling with Jesus to the cross. And, in **that** place we will find **another** very different mountaintop experience. The cross – that place that seems to be so God forsaken. The cross – that place of death and sorrow where we discover a love so big it **envelops** the entire world! The cross – that place where we discover grace, a grace that transforms our very lives!

Jesus showed Peter, James and John the glorious nature of Christ and they had trouble wrapping their minds around what they experienced. Jesus shows **us** the glorious nature of Christ and we can never quite wrap **our** minds around the simple light and beauty of the transfiguration. My friends, Christ's radiant face is the potential for **all** of creation. All creation,

broken yet beautiful, is full of the presence of God. God is there in those moments of the unconditional, tender love we share; God is there, between the lines when we share our stories and our fragile hopes; God is there, in the suffering and pain of the world; God is there in every moment of rescue, restoration, and resurrection. And, every time we experience love, forgiveness, **healing** and God's grace, **we** become forever changed.

I experienced a glimpse of God's brilliant presence that day when a very broken but beautiful Savannah spontaneously burst into song. God's presence broke into my life and shattered the box of my broken perception of beauty and art, and I was changed! It was a holy moment. It was a transformational experience of light and love and grace.

Today, we walk through the doorway into Lent and journey to the cross, that place of transforming love. Be open to be changed, be open to be transformed, and be open to be made new. May God richly bless our journey!