

Feast of the Transfiguration
Year A, RCL
August 9, 2020
North Fork Ministries
Gospel:
Luke 9:28-36, [37-43a]

About eight days after Peter had acknowledged Jesus as the Christ of God, Jesus took with him Peter and John and James, and went up on the mountain to pray. And while he was praying, the appearance of his face changed, and his clothes became dazzling white. Suddenly they saw two men, Moses and Elijah, talking to him. They appeared in glory and were speaking of his departure, which he was about to accomplish at Jerusalem. Now Peter and his companions were weighed down with sleep; but since they had stayed awake, they saw his glory and the two men who stood with him. Just as they were leaving him, Peter said to Jesus, "Master, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah"--not knowing what he said. While he was saying this, a cloud came and overshadowed them; and they were terrified as they entered the cloud. Then from the cloud came a voice that said, "This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!" When the voice had spoken, Jesus was found alone. And they kept silent and in those days told no one any of the things they had seen.

On the next day, when they had come down from the mountain, a great crowd met him. Just then a man from the crowd shouted, "Teacher, I beg you to look at my son; he is my only child. Suddenly a spirit seizes him, and all at once he shrieks. It convulses him until he foams at the mouth; it mauls him and will scarcely leave him. I begged your disciples to cast it out, but they could not." Jesus answered, "You faithless and perverse generation, how much longer must I be with you and bear with you? Bring your son here." While he was coming, the demon dashed him to the ground in convulsions. But Jesus rebuked the unclean spirit, healed the boy, and gave him back to his father. And all were astounded at the greatness of God.

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Years ago, when my son was only four or five years old, I took him on our first, serious overnight camping trip to a place called Pedernales Falls State Park, in the Texas Hill Country about an hour southwest of Austin. The Pedernales River flows through the cattle ranch once owned by President Lyndon Baines Johnson and, if the spring rains are sufficient and summer's onset not too early, the flint bottomed river creates a cool oasis amid the live oaks and twisted mesquite trees that make their home in the valley carved by the river. I had in mind hiking in four or five miles up the trail to a campsite nestled beside a small creek whose cool water flows rapidly from the mouth of a mossy spring, cascades over a high bluff and spills into a crystalline pool, where my son and I could bathe and swim amid the resident crawdads and catfish.

Before leaving Austin that morning, we stopped by Whole Foods Market to gather provisions for our adventure. If you have ever shopped at Whole Foods, you know it is a snacker's paradise. From an ocean of colorful bins, we filled a

dozen small plastic bags with all manner of salty nuts, dried fruit, and exotic chocolates. We bought crackers imported from Sweden and buffalo jerky dried in Montana. And on the way out we picked up a bunch of shiny red Washington cherries.

I loaded my backpack with our sleeping bags and tent and I put most of the food inside Nathan's miniature pack, purchased the day before just for this occasion. When we arrived at the trailhead, hardly able to contain his excitement, Nate put on his pack and raced up the trail ahead of me. We had advanced - perhaps 50 yards up the trail - when Nate stopped in his tracks, crawled on top of a smooth, rounded boulder and sat down. He pulled his little arms out of the shoulder straps, laid the backpack beside him and said, "Dad, let's stop here and eat every-fang."

Nate thought he had arrived. As a four-year-old boy, he couldn't have known that he was merely at the threshold of a journey, and that an expedition filled with the joys of a meteor-filled night sky, a riotous swim in a cascading waterfall, and the delights of a breakfast of crisp bacon and eggs cooked over glowing mesquite embers, all awaited him.

And so it was with the disciples. Peter, James, and John had accompanied Jesus on a camping trip up the mountain. They were ready to crawl into their sleeping bags when they noticed that Jesus' face had changed and his clothes had become, "dazzling white." Not only that, Jesus was chatting with the prophets - Moses and Elijah. Peter was so impressed with the place that he told Jesus that they should pitch three tents and stay right where they were. The disciples thought that they had arrived at the destination, but, as they were to discover, the journey with Jesus had only just begun.

If you have ever had a glimpse of divine transcendence, you understand the disciples' desire to hang on to the experience. Profound religious experience, a taste of God's presence, is seductive, and many people go through their lives trying to recreate that singular moment. But if we stay awake, God usually has something different, something surprising in store for us.

A few years ago a delightful young couple visited our church. He was formerly Baptist, and she, if I recall correctly, was raised Roman Catholic. They were clear-eyed, energetic, and planning a family. The kind of couple any church would want to add to their membership roll. They seemed to enjoy the worship service and stayed for coffee hour. A number of people stopped by to greet them and they clearly felt welcomed. As they were leaving they explained to me that they were new in town, had been visiting a variety of different churches, and were "looking for a church that meets all of our needs."

It's not the first time I've heard such a statement from "church shoppers." When I ask what sort of "needs" they are talking about I usually get a reply like, "Well,

you know, nice music, good preaching, friendly people, Christian education, something for the kids, a pleasant atmosphere. There is nothing wrong with wanting any of those things. It is the kind of thing that you and I would look for in a church as well. As part of a culture of consumption, we tend to put the selection of a church in the same category as choosing an automobile, a smart phone, or a piece of luggage.

As consumers, I'd like for people to be happy with their "church experience" on a Sunday morning, but that's not really the business we are in. We're not a hotel chain or an airline and consumer satisfaction is not our objective. We are in the business of transformation.

These past years I've had a lot of people tell me what they are looking for in a church. One of these days I dearly desire to hear somebody say, "I'm looking for a place that will change me." I want to hear somebody say, "I'm looking for a glimpse of the kingdom of heaven." Or "I want a place that will challenge my beliefs, make me uncomfortable with an old way of being." I want somebody to tell me that they are tired of the way they are now and they want to be reacquainted with Jesus."

The next day after the transfiguration, Jesus and his disciples came down from the mountain. They encountered a crowd, and a man in the crowd begged Jesus to look at his son. His son was writhing with convulsions, foaming at the mouth – probably an epileptic. The man had earlier begged Jesus' disciples to come to the aid of his son, but they couldn't help. I wonder if Peter, James and John couldn't help because they were still held captive by their mountaintop experience. Their desire to capture the holy, to contain it within the bounds of their limited experience, prevented them from realizing God's presence in the midst of a noisy and needy crowd.

I don't know if the disciples imagined that Jesus' garment was still dazzling white, or if it was now speckled with the spittle from the frothing mouth of an epileptic child. But Jesus "...healed the boy, and gave him back to his father. And all were astounded at the greatness of God."

May you be attentive to the prospect of transformation on this day, "as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts."