

Transfiguration Sunday, Year B
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St. James, Wheat Ridge

By the Rev. Becky Jones

I'm definitely a mountain person, not a beach person.
Given the choice of a day in the mountains versus a day at the beach,
I'd pick the mountains every time.
There's less chance of sunburn.
Less chance of getting sand in your shoes and from there all over
everything in your suitcase.
Less chance of a rogue wave washing over you or the undertow
pulling you out to sea.
And on a mountain, if something is going to bite you, you can at least
see it coming. It's not going to sneak up on you from below.

Now Jesus, I'm thinking he was a mountain person too.
Although I grant you, he did some of his best work around water:
Walking on it;
calming storms;
organizing the fish to go where he told them to.
Still, when push came to shove,
when Jesus had something really important he needed to do,
he headed to the mountains.

I think, like many of us, Jesus must've felt closer to God in the
mountains.
There's something about a mountain that opens us to God's presence.
And in our gospel story this morning,
Jesus takes Peter, James and John with him, up a high mountain.

And while they're up there, something extraordinary happens.
They see him transfigured. His clothes become dazzling white.
Then, out of nowhere, appear Moses and Elijah,
and of course the disciples are awestruck.
Then, to make things even weirder, a cloud overshadows them,
and they hear a heavenly voice speaking a blessing
similar to the one conveyed on Jesus at his baptism:
"This is my son, the Beloved. Listen to him!"

And with that, the vision ends,
and Jesus is restored to his normal state.

Both events, the baptism and the transfiguration are epiphanies.
Just as we began this season of Epiphany with the story of Christ's
baptism,
today we end the season with the transfiguration.
The word epiphany means "appearance,"
a sign of power and light emerging out of darkness,
suddenly and unexpectedly,
and all of our gospel stories during this season of epiphany
are meant to convey a sense of Christ's power.

Yet even with its glorious imagery,
the story of the transfiguration is difficult for us.
It's baffling.
It's mystical.
It's difficult to describe in words.
As they were coming down off the mountain,
Jesus told them to tell no one what they had seen.
I suspect they were not planning to
because they probably couldn't put it into words.
It must've been like peering into another dimension
when you have no frame of reference.

But put yourself in the shoes of Peter and James and John.
Before their trek up the mountain,
Jesus has been telling about what is to come.
How the Son of Man must undergo great suffering,
and be rejected, and be killed,
and after three days rise again.

This is not the Jesus they're used to.
This is an intense, gloomy Jesus,
weighed down with care.
And then he says something really ominous.
"If any want to become my followers," he says,
"let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me."

Cross? Who said anything about a cross up to now?

Talk about a buzz kill.
This is devastating stuff.
For the past week, the disciples have been surrounded by gloom.
Their holy quest, which began so cheerfully in the bright Galilean sun,
has turned ugly and scary and disheartening.
I'm thinking the cloud that overshadowed them on that mountain
was not the first cloud that had overshadowed them,
raining on their parade.

But here on this mountain, this time it's different.
This time, while they're looking at him,
they see him begin to glow.
He appears to change before their very eyes.

Now, the question for me has always been,
did Jesus suddenly change and begin to glow?
Or had there always been this unearthly light around Jesus,
but the disciples had just never seen it before?
Had never had the eyes to see it before?
Who really got transformed on that mountain?
Was it Jesus? Or was it the disciples?
And if it was the disciples, what changed?
What was it that briefly and suddenly gave them the vision
to see what was there all along, but hidden?

For one possible explanation, let's go back to the beach.
What I am about to tell you is not gleaned from any first-hand
experience.
But this is what others tell me.

If you were to be swimming around in the ocean,
which of course I would NOT be,
but if you were,
if you snorkeled or scuba dived,
you would be in a bright, underwater world,
full of fish, marine mammals, coral reefs.
There's a lot of life there,
because the sun is able to penetrate the water
down to about 600 feet,
which is about 595 feet deeper than I'm willing to go.

But if you kept going down, the ocean would get darker and darker.
 until no more sunlight could penetrate.
 Eventually, you would reach a state of complete blackness.
 I think that must be a terrifying place.

But then, and only then,
 if you are willing to remain in that place of utter darkness,
 You will begin to see something amazing.
 You will begin to see sea creatures.
 Not as many as in the shallower depths,
 but enough that you know this zone of the ocean is not uninhabited.
 There is life here.
 But if it's complete darkness, how do you see them?
 The answer is, they glow.
 Many sea creatures are bioluminescent.
 They say at least 1,500 different fish species are can do this.
 It's especially prevalent among jellyfish.
 It's just that when there's sunlight, we don't notice it.
 We have to be in a very dark place,
 often for an extended period of time,
 before our eyes are capable of seeing the light that was always there,
 the light that comes from within these creatures.

Oceanographers call this the world of *luminous darkness*.
 I think that it's no coincidence that that is the same term used by
 mystics
 when they speak of the "dark night of the soul."
 Such darkness is a kind of spiritual crisis
 that can lead us from profound unknowing to radiant transformation.
 Luminous darkness.

When we enter into such a darkness,
 it may feel like something is broken in our relationship with God,
 that something needs to be fixed.
 Maybe everything we've believed up to this point begins to unravel.
 We do not perceive God's presence.
 It can be very disconcerting. Very uncomfortable. Very scary.

But as it turns out, the perceived darkness that descends on our souls,

eventually can give way to unutterable radiance.

Author Mirabai Starr, who studies the mystics of all religions, says that when we allow ourselves to become undone in this darkness, we develop new eyes to see the radiance all around us.

“The mystical paradox is that the suffering we experience in the Dark Night of the Soul yields to an intensification of longing for union with God,” she says. “And the divine light comes pouring into our empty soul.”¹

Maybe some of you have experienced this dark night of the soul, maybe more than once.

Maybe you feel you’re trapped right now in a darkness from which you can’t escape.

All I can tell you is to trust.

Trust the darkness.

Let it surround you, and stop struggling.

Trust, knowing that God is the God of darkness as well as light.

God is the God of the beaches and oceans as well as mountains.

And that God WILL provide us with the light we need to see.

So let us be alert for those rare, visionary experiences when God allows us to glimpse something of glory – experiences that can sustain us through darker days, and fill us with the knowledge that the light is ALWAYS there, whether we perceive it or not.

Amen.

¹ “[Abiding in the Luminous Dark](http://www.mirabaistarr.com),” a three-part webinar series with Mirabai Starr, www.mirabaistarr.com