

SECOND SUNDAY OF LENT – CYCLE A – 2-17-08
(The Transfiguration: The Lesson)

I find this gospel account of the transfiguration to be exceedingly intriguing because when you analyze it, it's basically a story not only of life, but of invitation.

You take the elements of the story, which we know so well. There is the transfiguration – the sudden vision, the great glory. All of us have those moments. There's the wedding day. There's the first job. There's the adventure. There's the first home, the first child. And all of these things are there in their splendid form, and they shine forth with joy. Just try to remember all those visions that you have had.

Just try to remember – those of you who are married, even ordination – your wedding day. Try to remember your first house that you bought. The first car. The first job. The first paycheck. And there is something transfigured, and life is fulfilled, and there it is, glorious. And the transfiguration story gives us that.

But secondly, it also introduces something else which we enter into very easily. Notice what Peter said. After he sees this marvelous vision, he says, "Well, let's build three booths here, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah." In short what he's saying is: "This is so wonderful. Let's hold on to it forever. Let's freeze the moment." And if you think that's a far-off story of two thousand years ago, you're wrong – this is our story every day. Under the pressure of the media and advertisers, we're always asked to freeze the moment. We're always asked to say "and they lived happily ever after." We're always asked to look at the gorgeous apartments and clothes and lifestyles and say "this is the way it is forever," and advertising encourages that.

But of course realism comes along and says "that's impossible." Even with the most wonderful dream house, sooner or later you have to clean the gutters. Even the most perfect wedding day, sooner or later, there's conflict because you're two people, and not really one, yet.

And so Peter, of course, represents the foolishness. He represents the escapism, if you will. He represents modern advertising. "Freeze the moment. Let's build three booths. This is it forever. Let's hold on to it."

And then the third element comes in, which is interesting. Enter the scenario two spoilsports, by the names of Moses and Elijah. And while Peter is excited about this moment because he's just gotten his first car or his first house, Moses and Elijah are whispering to Jesus. And what are they whispering about? Well, they tell us. They are whispering to Jesus about his passage to Jerusalem, which is the translation for his passion, his suffering, and his death. Here they come along and mess up the whole picture. There's Jesus in his magnificent glory, all ablaze and light and white, and these two come along and talk about his passage and his suffering.

But when you take that whole story, what Luke is saying is, “This is not only the Christian life, this is the story of every human journey. And every human journey unfolds in basically five steps after the transfiguration.” I want you to think of the Transfiguration in your life.

The first step is always the revision of the dream. As I said before, reality sets in. Your feelings toward each other on the wedding day and ten years later are not quite the same, are they? They may be better, hopefully. They may be worse. But they’re not the same. The realities of biology come in. People do get sick. Children do throw up, and diapers have to be changed. And death intrudes. Death and sickness. And all of a sudden, you see, we begin to revise the dream. We don’t want it in its present form. We’d like to build those three booths and hold on to it at its best forever, but Moses and Elijah are turning out to be correct after all. There’s some kind of passage, some kind of passion or suffering or change, that’s demanded. And you almost get the full sense of the story – some change is going to be demanded in order to recapture the original ideal. And so you begin to revise the dream somewhat.

The second stage of the journey is, of course (it hits all of us), the temptation to escape because, in fact, the transfiguration did not freeze over, like the advertisers promised. And usually the escapism takes two forms. It takes the form of cynicism. So we make all those marriage jokes, and we make all those husband and wife jokes, and the job jokes, and things like that, covering up our cynicism that arises because the promise didn’t hold up. The job after a while got boring. The house got too small. We needed a better neighborhood. The friendship soured or was betrayed. Our darling children turned out to disappoint us. And we begin to have a sense of the loss of expectation and the loss of the wonderful. It’s in this stage, by the way, where most divorces take place.

Or the other form it takes is that you begin to deal with your friendships and your marriages in terms of legalisms and rights, and the message gets lost.

Some clever person did a little parody of one of the gospels, and I would like to share it with you, you may have heard it before:

Then Jesus took his disciples up on the mountains, and when they had gathered around him, he taught them, saying, “Blessed are the poor in spirit, theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those who mourn. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness. Blessed are the merciful, the pure of heart. Blessed the peacemakers. Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”

Then Simon Peter said, “Are we supposed to know this?”

And Andrew said, “Do we have to write this down?”

And Philip said, “I don’t have any paper.”

And Bartholomew said, “Do we have to turn it in?”

And John said, “The other disciples don’t have to learn this.”

And Matthew said, “I have to go to the bathroom.”

And Judas said, “What does this have to do with real life?”

And one of the Pharisees present asked to see Jesus' lesson plans, and inquired of Jesus, "What is your terminal objective? Have you completed a task analysis? What about a diagnostic survey?"

And Jesus wept.

We do that. That's the second stage, which occurs even though we thought we would hold on to the transfiguration forever, without movement.

The third stage of the journey, of course, begins a turnabout for those who persist. That's the time when you begin to take on and to share one another's burdens, both in sympathy and in wisdom, because, you see, you realize that life isn't the ideal that the television says, but has to be worked at. This stage usually requires a certain amount of reflection, a great deal of prayer, and sometimes it does require a trauma. There's a loss; there's a sickness; you lose your job. You're disappointed with your children. There's an addition that you struggle with. But nevertheless, through this you begin to build empathy. You begin to see people in a different light because your weaknesses are apparent and you begin to accept their weaknesses. And that begins to be a movement.

Then you hit the fourth stage, which is really an advance. As you go through life, you begin to get to the level of acceptance on your life's journey. And you accept life - not in defeat, that's important - but you accept it in love. It's like Jesus who looked at the young man, and loved him. It's like Jesus who looked at Magdalene, and saw possibility. It's like Jesus, who saw Matthew, the tax collector, and said, "Come, follow me." It's when your vision begins to see people with the eyes of Christ.

And then, of course, you hit the fifth level. You get the ideal back. You get the transfiguration that you started out with, but now transformed. Not with all the splendor of Mount Tabor, not with all the dazzle of white robes, and voices, and clouds, but a true and sincere transfiguration of life and love that you never dreamed possible. These are the whole people. These are the people who now understand what Moses and Elijah were whispering about. It was necessary for Jesus to go through his terrible passage for his transfiguration, in glory, and it is the same for us.

There's a very marvelous writer, Madeleine L'Engle, who writes a lot of children's books. She's a prize-winner. One of her books is *Two-Part Invention*, the story of her forty-five year marriage to a cancer victim and actor, Hugh Franklin, who now is dead. And I'd like to quote one or two lines of hers. As she was sitting beside Hughie's bed and watching as he was dying, she wrote: "I am who I am because of our years together, freed by his acceptance and love of me."

The operative word is "freed." She's just going through her five steps. She's been freed from illusion and delusion. She's been freed from cynicism by his acceptance and love.

She also has a powerful final comment on her marriage, and marriage in general, and on life's passage, which is what I'm talking about. She says: "Our love has been anything but perfect and anything but static. Inevitably there have been times when one of us has outrun the other, and has had to wait patiently for the other to catch up. There have been times when we have misunderstood each other, demanded too much of each other, been insensitive to the other's

needs. I do not believe there is any marriage in which this does not happen. The growth of love is not a straight line, but a series of hills and valleys. I suspect that in every good marriage there are times when love seems to be over. Sometimes those desert lines are simply the only way to the next oasis, which is far more lush and beautiful after the desert crossing than it could possibly have been without.”

Isn't that lovely? It's about life, not just marriage. She knew she had to go through those desert lines and then the oasis turned out to be so much more beautiful. And that's exactly what Moses and Elijah were saying. Foolish Peter, who wanted to freeze the moment, like he was straight out of Madison Avenue, but Moses and Elijah said, and Jesus agreed, “There's another, better, more profound transfiguration, that comes only through the passage of those five steps.”

Once you've been through the oasis, and once you learn to pray, and swallow your pride, you say, “I need a power greater than myself. I've got disappointment, and I've got hurt, and I've got bitterness, perhaps, but I realize now that these can be a passage to the oasis, the transfiguration.” As I said, many haven't reached that point. They're stuck in cynicism. Marriage is a fraud. The job's a fraud. Friendships are a fraud. These are people who got stuck on stage two. And they have to learn a little bit more, so let's pray for them; and pray for ourselves.

And next time you listen to this gospel, just don't think of the transfiguration as a magic show. Think of it as a profound statement about life. There's the ideal, but to achieve it in a different dimension, you must undergo a passage. You and I balk, and you and I don't want to go through that desert, but go we must, we have no choice. But we're not alone. We have each other. We have our faith community. And above all, we have the Jesus who's been through it all, who knows what it's about, and turns to us in his glory and says, “Come to me, all of you who are heavily laden and burdened, and I will refresh your soul, for my burden is easy and my yoke is light.”