

Transfigured
Sermon by Rev. Jennifer Gingras
The Monroe Congregational Church, UCC
February 15, 2015

Matthew 16:24-17:8

It's early on a Monday. The first faint glow of dawn spreads over the snow-covered lawn, but you don't notice. It's just the beginning of another week with far too much to do and way too little time. You feel your chest tighten as you anticipate the day ahead. You gulp down some orange juice but don't really taste it.

You grab the newspaper off the porch and look at the front page, with headlines about veterans trying to cope with post-traumatic stress, and about political machinations over budgets. There is a sidebar about a suicide bombing in Iraq and the build-up of plastics in the world's oceans, with details and pictures inside. But you feel too fragmented to really focus on reading anything.

You step outside and the cold morning air is like being slapped in the face. And then you see it – the way the early morning light on the snow-covered lawn creates this luminous, translucent quality. And you're struck by the beauty. It's as if you're at a private viewing of a great artistic masterpiece. You forget to breathe, it's so astonishing.

Well, this Monday morning epiphany only lasts for a moment or two. For a split second it feels as if the world is transformed, transfigured by Something so much larger than you or anyone else can explain. What you are seeing is Mystery. What you are experiencing is a deeper dimension to reality. It is as if God has riveted your attention on the miracle and gift of it all....

I imagine something like that happened on that mountain with Jesus, Peter, James and John. They had a mystical experience of God's presence, on the mountaintop, in Jesus, in each other, and everywhere. For a blessed moment or two, God riveted their attention with sheer Holiness.

Maybe he climbed that mountain to rest. Matthew gives us a clue with the words "Six days later". It's a familiar pattern, laid down in the first chapter of Genesis 1 - God created for six days then rested. Later, on Mount Sinai, God gave the Israelites a rule: after every six days of work they should stop

being so busy and listen. That is part of what the Transfiguration signifies. Jesus led a busy life, not unlike the busy lives of people everywhere, including the gospel-writer's community, and our own.

Always talking, always healing, always on the move. Jesus had been busy, busy, busy . . . so after he fed that huge crowd all that bread and fish, Jesus took three friends up the mountain and just stood still. Didn't heal anybody, didn't pray, didn't teach anything, just stood there. He pressed "pause."

And in the space created by that pause, a remarkable vision took place. The vision changed how Peter and James and John saw everything, it gave them new eyes to see the divine connections between God and Jesus and Elijah and Moses and them. Then they went back down the mountain. And they got busy once again.

You know busy. As usual, you have guessed wrong about which line will be the quickest, and now you will probably be late to your next appointment. In your check-out line everyone has a fistful of coupons to sort and the clerk seems to be moving in slow motion. You feel your level of impatience rising. Then you hear the woman in front of you speaking Spanish to her little son sitting in the grocery cart. He's maybe two, and when you make eye contact he grins. And you smile back.

And you wonder – are they immigrants? Are they even legal? What does she do? Perhaps she's a housekeeper, you decide. You think about the angry political rhetoric over immigration that uses the word "aliens." But the mother and child in front of you are not aliens. They are standing in line at the supermarket, just like you. Then the child smiles at you again.

And suddenly, without warning, everything about that checkout line changes in some transfiguring way. You are seeing everyone enveloped by the light of God's extravagant love for everyone. And there's this mystical sense that human separateness is more illusion than reality, that our destinies are interwoven. That we are all in this wonderful and sometimes fearful thing called life, together. And that each person has their own human measure of hurt and fear and fragile dreams, so we best treat each other gently and mercifully and with great love.

And for a blessed moment or two you no longer care how slow the line is moving. Your attention is riveted by this wonderful sense of God's embracing love for everyone around you.

Sometimes when these transfiguring moments happen, we're inclined not to trust them. It's not reasonable or rational, we say. Is this just all in my head? Wishful thinking? Is this experience of God's presence real?

You've just received the phone call you've been both anticipating and dreading. "I've looked at the results of your biopsy," the doctor had said. "It's not what we were hoping for. So let's make an appointment to talk about options." Isn't it astonishing how much life can change with a single phone call? "Options," he said, and you feel your imagination beginning to race uncontrollably toward the worst possible future.

Suddenly, you feel like you're living in a foreign land where you don't know the language and wonder how you'll find your way. So you call a friend. "Can we have coffee...now?" Over multiple cups of coffee that neither of you really drink, you talk, and somehow it helps to hear yourself say the words out loud – about how you expected the news but it's still harder than you imagined. The wise friend just listens. Advice is the last thing you need at a time when everything seems to have a question mark after it.

Strangely, mysteriously, just the friend's presence seems like enough for now – this simple gift of connection over mostly untouched cups of coffee. Then the friend just reaches out and touches your hand. Does anything banish fear more perfectly than simple human touch? And from somewhere you remember the story: of how on the mountaintop, Jesus touched the terrified disciples and said, "Do not be afraid." And as you sit there something changes, as if that coffee shop has been illuminated by some Holy Light.

Oh, the diagnoses? It is still what it is. And there are still the "options" ahead of you. But it's as if the friend's touch has mystically connected you to the Great Spirit Presence of God. For you don't have to be a spiritual giant to experience it. Nor do mystical experiences come as reward for extra goodness. Sometimes just the touch of a human hand is enough, for a blessed moment or two, to rivet your attention on God's transfiguring love. So over coffee you say to your friend, "This time has been a Godsend." And you mean it...literally.

These kinds of transfiguring, mystical experiences, when the Divine rivets human attention, don't just happen on mountaintops or only to really religious people who have special access to a spiritual dimension not available to the rest of us. You don't have to give up your everyday life, or go on a pilgrimage to some distant shrine, or find a master to teach you. The basic requirement of being a mystic – to have those transfiguring, transformational experiences of God – is to pay attention to what's already there, and to be open... and to listen. May we have ears to hear.... Amen.