

Transfiguration Sunday C, Luke 9:28-36
Preached at CLF on 2-18-07 by Pastor David Van Kley

CHRIST AND THE REAL WORLD

The transfiguration. Jesus takes Peter, James, and John up a mountain, where he prays for so long that they drift off to sleep. Suddenly, he is transformed into a vision of light, his face shining like the midsummer sun. Two of the greatest figures in Israel's history materialize like Star Trek characters from another planet, Moses, the law-giver, Elijah the prophet. The disciples are jarred awake, just in time to witness the vision. But almost before they can take it in, it starts to fade. Jesus' face flickers; Elijah and Moses retreat into their time tunnels. Like a child chasing a butterfly, Peter tries to net the moment: "Master, let's make three dwellings, one for each of you!" Immediately, a dark cloud engulfs them all and a divine voice thunders: "this is my beloved Son, my chosen, listen to him!"

Then it is over. Jesus and the disciples are all alone up there on the mountain.

Silence.

The next day, down the mountain, they encounter needy crowds, an epileptic boy, his desperate father. Having left the ideal world, they run smack dab into the real world.

For Peter, it must have been like waking up after a really good dream. You know the feeling? You try to go back to sleep to finish the dream, to hold onto it as long as possible, to linger in it for awhile. You were catching a monster trout in a wilderness stream, had just landed in Hawaii for a week's vacation, were named a finalist on **An American Idol** and then you just **had** to wake up and face the real world with bills to pay, tests to study for, and a temperature of twenty below zero. Peter must have felt like that. He wanted to hold onto the dream world a little longer, maybe forever. But no.

As a pastor, I sometimes feel that way at weddings. Couples live for the day. No expense is spared. Great care goes into planning every detail: the color of the flowers, the cut of the clothing, the choice of photographs, the decorations at the hall. Even the cutting of the cake is carefully choreographed, like an Olympic figure skating program, so that an image of happiness can be captured on video and held forever.

But a few hours of ecstasy are followed by the challenge of a lifetime, making a marriage work. And when too much emphasis is placed on the wedding and too little on the relationship it initiates, the dream of a perfect wedding soon can become the nightmare of a bad marriage. The wedding is a foundation, not the sum total of a marriage. The couple must use their wedding vows like a key to unlock daily commitment or the wedding is literally not worth the paper used to print the invitations.

Life's shining moments are like commas in the body of an essay. Brief pauses between long sections of routine, more than a little boredom, and some real challenges.

We all love those shining moments: Christmas Eve, the Caribbean Cruise. But how quickly they pass! And we find ourselves somewhere down the mountain, joining crowds of needy people, including but not limited to epileptic boys and desperate fathers.

For some, religion is all about the shining moments. Seriously ill in the hospital, they saw Jesus beckoning at the end of a tunnel. Driving on Highway 385, they heard the voice of God. They were filled with the Spirit while sitting around a campfire at Outlaw Ranch. One young man told me that he came to faith the Sunday he could see the numbers on the hymn board in church despite his nearsightedness. "It was amazing," he said; "all of a sudden the numbers became clear and I knew there was a God." That's one of the strangest visions I've ever heard of.

Not that I doubt his experience, any more than I doubt that of Peter, James, and John. Any more than I doubt the truth of that moment in my own life when for the first time, the burdens of sin and guilt lifted like fog, allowing the sun to come out at last. The point is that life did not end there. We must bring such experiences with us into a changing and challenging future...or they're not worth much.

Baptism and Confirmation are shining moments in the Lutheran tradition. When a child is washed in the cleansing waters, we sense that this is a holy moment. When a group of youth confesses their faith in Christ, we freeze their smiles on film. Then, too often, we place those experiences up on an imaginary shelf, like religious trophies, to collect dust. "He was baptized Lutheran," people say, when they call to arrange a funeral. "I was confirmed out at the chapel when I was a kid," she points out, as she asks the pastors to perform her wedding. As if these moments were **the very sum** of the Christian life, not foundations for it.

It's human nature to idealize the past. Recently, I asked a man who's lived a long time to offer his insights. "Put it this way, Reverend," he said; "my generation had the best of it. It's all downhill from here." He went on to speak about the time before computers and cell phones, when people **really** talked to each other. The time before terrorism and nuclear weapons, when people didn't fear each other. He didn't say it, but I thought of the time before the ALC and LCA became the ELCA. The time before the new church building and the latest songbook. A time of innocence, when everybody went to church and believed that the Bible was dictated word for word and delivered by a heavenly UPS driver. Life was simple and everyone knew what to believe.

If ever there was such a time.

Butterflies held with a stick pin in the pages of a book may be beautiful, but true religion is alive, just as butterflies are free. The past's shining moments are given as a foundation, not a substitute for an enduring relationship with Christ.

When Peter wanted to hang on to the dream of the transfiguration, the cloud

rolled over and the divine voice said, “Listen to Jesus, my Chosen, my Son.” This Jesus is on his way to Skull Hill. Stand beneath his cross and hear in his cry of forsakenness how God identifies with all who suffer. Sit with the disciples in your confusion and doubt until he breathes new life into you through the Spirit. Encounter him in the cries of the hungry, the angry voices of those who are discriminated against. Hear him when your kids ask for help with their homework. See him in the sixth grader at school, sitting alone. In your aging neighbor fumbling with her garbage bags. For he appears to you there as surely as he appeared on this mountain.

And when this Christ seems utterly absent, go into your closet and sit in silence until the Word comes like a still small voice. Listen! For God is ever speaking, if we have ears to hear.

Today, you’ve come to worship. The experience may be so-so. This isn’t the Super Bowl halftime show: light and sound, smoke and mirrors. It’s not even a decent fireworks display on Pageant Hill. The preaching may sometimes almost put you to sleep. The wrong notes we hit may hurt your ears. As a community we may be so distracted as to fail to offer each other the support we really need. Still, I always hope that worship can be for us like a mini-transfiguration. That each week something may jar us awake so that we see Jesus in his glory and love. A new insight, a hug just when we need it, the body and the blood. Forgiveness. A shining moment.

Something to take home with us, because we certainly can’t stay here. Discipleship is not played out on mountaintops or between two candles on an altar, but out there, in the real world. The world of epileptic children, desperate fathers, and more. Which is where we’re headed in a few short moments.

The good news—the incredibly good news—is that Christ goes with us. Amen.