

God's Dwelling Place

March 6, 2011

Transfiguration

Deb

TRC

Both of our daughters took ballet lessons for many years.

In fact, when Vickie had her first recital she was about four years old and our son Scott was five.

Following the recital when grandpa asked Scott

how he liked his first ballet recital,

Scott replied, "That was the most boring night of my whole life!"

I heard a command over and over in my daughters' ballet classes.

After a pirouette, the teacher would call out:

"Pause... hold... *RESIST.*"

After a delay,

a hanging in the air,

the dancers would place their heel gently on the floor

and come to a rest.

Every turn,

every lunge,

every grand plie

was followed by that same instruction:

“Pause... hold... *RESIST.*”

Resist the pull of gravity for just a second.

Resist the urge to land where you normally land.

Certainly with this mysterious gospel text

where the veil between heaven and earth is at its thinnest

we don't land where we normally land.

Oh Peter wants to desperately –

but even as he is laying out his plans for how to make this mystery

into a common experience – he is interrupted –

did you catch that in our reading –

he is not even done sharing his idea

and God opens the heavens

and repeats the baptismal proclamation –

"This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased;

and adds to that

“Listen to him!”

Listen to him... Pause...hold resist.

For today God is saying – don't do anything just listen, listen.

Don't do – be.

The Hebrew scripture for today – which we didn't read –

was Moses' experience of going up Mt Sinai

to receive the stone tablets.

God's invitation to go up the mountain reads in our translation –

"Come up to me on the mountain, and wait there;

But could be better translated –

"Come up to me on the mountain, and be;

come up the mountain and just be.

Pause, hold resist Listen, be.

The transfiguring of Jesus provides a dazzling,

dizzying experience for those who have come with him up the mountain.

One can well understand that Peter, James, and John would desire

to find a form for their experience,

some kind of container to help them absorb

and define what has taken place.

We perceive this in Peter's impulse to construct dwellings

for Jesus, Moses, and Elijah.

Faced with an event of overwhelming spiritual import,

he responds at a physical level:

Let me build something.

But he is then told you already have a dwelling place for Christ

and it is in human form.

Peter's offer is still on his lips when the bright cloud envelops them,

and the voice from within it speaks those baptismal words.

The word for what the cloud does is **overshadow**.

We've seen this word before.

It appears in the angel Gabriel's conversation with Mary,

when he responds to her question

about how it will be possible for her to give birth to the child

whom he has asked her to bear.

“The Holy Spirit will come upon you,”

he tells her, “and the power of the Most High will **overshadow** you”.

In the gospels,

the Annunciation is the only occasion besides the Transfiguration

that this word appears.

The gospel writers’ use of the word draws our attention

to the resonance between the story of the Annunciation to Mary

and the story of the Transfiguration.

Each tale reminds us that we cannot contain or confine God

within human-made structures.

When God shows up,

God often appears in and through people:

God goes not for tabernacles but for human bodies.

Or, rather, God makes a tabernacle of our bodies:

God seeks to make of us a dwelling,

a habitation for the holy. Emmanuel – God with us.

The heavens open

the words come from the overshadowing cloud:

“This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased;

listen to him!”

At this the three disciples fall on their faces **not** in worship

but in fear, hands over ears and eyes tightly shut.

Jesus sees them, touches them –

touch from Jesus in Matthew’s gospel always leads to healing,

Jesus touches them

and raises them up and tells them not to be afraid.

Do not be afraid –

those words too echo back to our Christmas stories

of Mary and shepherd's fearing the angel

and being told don't be afraid –

and they move us forward too

to the resurrection stories when angels again call us

to not be afraid for Christ is risen.

And Jesus does that a lot – telling his followers not to fear.

As Jesus touches these three and tells them

“get up or be raised and do not be afraid”

they open their eyes and discover that Jesus is now alone.

This business of being host to the divine is no easy thing,

God (literally) knows.

So it's interesting that the soon-to-be-mother Mary

and the flat-on-their-faces disciples

each receive precisely the same assurance:

Do not be afraid.

And each goes on their way,

carrying something they had not previously known.

Having had this encounter

Peter, James and John head back down the mountain –

not with stone tablets,

but with a new sense of wonder and awe

at the person they are called to follow.

In the absence of being able to build physical dwellings,

the disciples would have wanted, I suspect,

to construct a story about their mountaintop experience:

a container of words, at least, that would help them hold

and convey what had happened to Jesus and to themselves.

To hold the experience in story at least.

Perhaps anticipating this,

Jesus enjoins them not to tell what has transpired

until after his resurrection.

This is not for revealing, he tells them;

this is for you to carry within you,

to ponder,

to conceal until the fullness of time.

Pause... hold... resist....

Can you imagine how hard that must have been to hold that all in?

As the events of holy week unfold to not stand up

and tell the others what you saw on the mountain?

It was important that Peter, James, and John
have that mountaintop experience.

It wasn't important for them to tell the story,

not yet;

that wasn't the point of their outing.

But the experience would work on them,

shape them,

and continue to transform

and perhaps even transfigure them.

The knowledge they carried would alter

every future encounter: with Jesus,

with the other disciples,

and with those to whom they ministered.

The story of the Transfiguration calls me to remember
that there are times for revealing and times for concealing.

There are seasons to tell our story.

And there are seasons to hold the story within us

so that we can absorb it,

reflect on it,

and let it (and us) grow into a form that will foster the telling.

That seems to be how it worked for John.

John seems to ponder these things in his heart and let them shape him.

Much later he will write

“And the Word became flesh and lived –

dwelt –

tabernacled

among us and we have seen his glory,

glory as of a father's only son,

full of grace and truth.

John knew the place God chose to dwell was in Jesus

and later – in us.

I am guessing when John penned those words

he was remembering today's story.

Let me go back in our story for today.

Our text begins with the words –

six days later –

It was six days before the Transfiguration

when Peter confessed that Jesus was the Messiah

and Jesus called Peter "the rock."

But I wonder....

I wonder if Peter's real sense of clarity happened here

on today's mountain,

when the voice interrupts all his plots and plans

and announces that this Jesus is none other than God's beloved Son

and so the most important thing Peter can do is simply listen to him.

In that moment everything for Peter, I suspect, was still...and clear...

and made sense. Pause, hold resist.

But of course it didn't last.

Peter needs to be pulled up off the ground,

perhaps wondering if anything had actually happened

or whether he had imagined it all.

And then on the way down the mountain

Jesus will again share talk of his impending death and destiny.

Peter will struggle to listen, to follow, to be faithful.

Actually, he will more than struggle,

he will deny and will fail.

And Jesus will reach out,

touch him,

raise him up again,

and send him forth.

I have a hunch that each time Peter fell down and got up again,

he would look back on this day and recall those words,

"Just listen to him

That's what I mean by saying that this is the moment

when Peter's clarity comes,

when his own transfiguration begins –

when he fails,

falls,

and is lifted up again

and realizes that above and beyond everything else,

he is called to listen to Jesus.

This pattern, I think, shapes the life of all of us, too.

We, too, of course, try our best,

sometimes succeeding and sometimes coming up short.

We, too, have moments of insight and moments of denial.

We, too, fall down in fear

and are raised up again to go forth in confidence.

We, too, are called to listen,

called to discern God's way in the world,

called to partner with God

and in this way be transformed.

Pause hold resist

Transfiguration Sunday marks the end of the season of Epiphany.

There is a lot of talk about light during Epiphany –

beginning with that bright shining star that led the Wise Men

to baby Jesus.

We have even heard Jesus call us the light of the world.

Transfiguration is the culmination of the epiphany season,

the grand finale,

where Jesus is revealed to us as being one with God, ...holy.

This biggest epiphany of all –

this holy shining moment up on the mountain –

comes right before Ash Wednesday and the season of Lent.

And this is not an accident.

There is a connection between this epiphany –

the transfiguration –

and what is to follow.

The transfiguration is the prelude to the cross.

Jesus in dazzling white in full glory on a mountain

And Jesus in a crown of thorns in full glory says: It is finished.

Jesus in full divinity and full humanity walks to the cross.

Jesus' return trip down the mountain is the beginning

of his fatal journey to Jerusalem.

God claims us in one holy shining moment,

and then sends us back down the mountain

to watch the one to whom we are to listen, die.

Don't you wonder if while the disciples were locked in Upper rooms,
full of fear following the death of the one they were following –

don't you wonder if Peter James and John

huddled in a corner together trying to make sense of today's story again?

Where's the dwelling place of God now?

Everything feels so God forsaken.

But in a few days the women who follow and listen will hear –

Don't be afraid – He has been raised. Pause...hold ...resist.

Jesus is now the one raised up

and we need not be afraid because even now

God chooses to dwell in human form,

in you and in me lives the holiness of God.

Enabling us to be transformed by a story we hold

and to tell a story that shapes us.

Enabling us to go up holy mountains

and to come down to streets

and kitchens

and schools

and workplaces

both to encounter the Holiness of God and to share it.

All the while being ready to pause, hold resist

and to land in a place we would not normally land.

We will not always have the courage

and sometimes we will fail or fall

but the story and the Spirit dwelling in us

will raise us up and remind us that there is no reason to be afraid.

The story of transfiguration is the point

at which God says to the world

and to each of us we can not build God a monument

and we can not keep God safe.

We also can not escape the light that God will shed on our path.

We can not escape God, Emmanuel, among us.

God will find us in our homes

and in our schools

and in our workplaces.

God will dwell in us when our hearts are broken

and when we discover joy.

God will find us when we run away from God

and when we are sitting in the middle of what seems like hell

God will choose to dwell there with us.

So be raised and do not be afraid. Pause, Hold, Resist, Listen

