

"Bright Light and Fog Below," Luke 9:28-36: The Rev. Dr. Thomas W. Blair, February 25, 2007

It all really begins - and ends, with prayer – life, that is. If you've ever sought to be grounded in what you're doing; finding what the next steps are that you should take, what the best possible decision should be- in whatever circumstance, then you know something of what I speak.

The opening sentence from M. Scott Peck's classic work *The Road Less Traveled* has come back to me, again and again: "**Life is Difficult.**" That's often how life hits us, how it feels, from the inside. It doesn't mean that life is joyless or impossible or meaningless, but it **is** one thing after another - each one demanding that we get up out of our favorite chair.

Life is paying taxes, or a child who isn't doing so well in school, or another child who is doing too much outside of school, or the threat of downsizing, or the reality of downsizing, or the wrong numbers on the blood profile, or the need to plan more in order to get what you want, or to re-plan after you don't get what you want. What makes life difficult is that we continually face physical, mental and social challenges.

What 'difficult' really seems to imply is that an intentional effort is needed, and this effort involves a continual investment of energy. A high school senior was asked about her last semester classes; "Will they be a piece of cake?" She replied, "I'm afraid not; it's going to be difficult." When asked why - she said "There's a new French teacher who's just arrived; she's just finished her Ph.D. - and you know, they don't just give those things away." Hard times ahead. As she said this, you could just see her gearing up, getting ready for the challenge. She wasn't giving up- at all- but was preparing to engage on a higher level.

A corollary of 'life is difficult'- is 'life is a test.'

Gearing up is needed- for the reality is that human situations fall apart unless they are constantly built up. The law of 'wind down' - of entropy - applies. Unless we wind things up, they devolve into less than they should be. Without continual intentional effort relationships become routine, taken for granted, stale, and in many cases, unless carefully tended - dissolve. Without continual intentional effort, personal goals remain unrealized dreams. Without continual intentional effort, enterprises flounder. Weeds grow around mansions, sagebrush rolls through ghost towns. Even in paradise - humans had to tend the garden. Human life is difficult because cosmic life is unfinished.

It can get tougher. Human life becomes more difficult when the circumstances we face interact with the moral agenda we carry. When we are committed to compassion and face situations of suffering, we struggle in how it is we can make a real difference without totally depleting ourselves. When we're committed to peace and face situations of division and hostility, we struggle to find ways of engagement without worsening the conflict. When we value honesty and face less than transparent situations, it is difficult to walk along the path of truth. Life is difficult when we try to bring to it what is best in us. It takes continual creative effort to bring to life compassion, peace and honesty. Virtue is hard work; it doesn't happen without

preparation, and prayer always plays a necessary, foundational part.

The story of the Transfiguration brings us to the threshold of Lent. For us it is a pre-temptation event. As a Bible scholar has described it, “for a moment the curtain of the commonplace is drawn aside” and the disciples catch a glimpse “in Jesus...of the glory of God.” All too often omitted in telling the story is that the account begins with Jesus’ need to pray; he grounded himself once more in the Source of compassion, peace and truth.

The headlines of this passage scream out something more sensational than this; the scene is Hollywood worthy enough for Stephen Spielberg or George Lucas to take on. The normally unobservant disciples couldn’t miss what took place up in the highlands, but they remembered and recorded what happened only in light of Jesus actions after he descended below. What occurred there was striking, unforgettable: while Jesus was praying, he caught fire from within. His face changed, his clothes became dazzling white; light burst through all his seams and showed them all what he was made of. Then, in the circle of his spotlight, two other figures appeared - Moses the lawgiver and the prophet Elijah - dead heroes of the past alive in the present, as if time were nothing but a veil to be parted and stepped through.

You can take this as metaphor - or as living testimony; either way Jesus’ integrity shines through. Yet the disciples still didn’t know what to make of it.

Peter wants to construct little monuments to capture this incredible experience, and says so. With that, a cloud envelops them all. God’s voice is heard in the floating mist: “This is my Son, my Chosen. Listen to him!” Then as quickly as it all began - it’s over. Moses and Elijah disappear, Jesus is alone - and no one says anything about it.

As long as people have tried to interpret these texts, there have been questions. Is this a post-resurrection appearance inserted back into the Gospel account by a later editor? Does it describe a vision, a dream, or an actual occurrence? Is it an addition to the Gospel by the early church to highlight the divinity of Jesus? So much mystery.

The poet Edwin Muir has tried to capture the astonishment of the disciple eye-witnesses at this Transfiguring experience:

We would have thrown our clothes away for lightness, But that even they, though sour and travel stained, Seemed, like our flesh, made of immortal substance, And the soiled flax and wool lay light upon us, Like friendly wonders ...

*Was it a vision Or did we see that day the unseeable One - glory of the everlasting world Perpetually at work, though never seen Since Eden locked the gate that’s everywhere And nowhere?**

Poetry, but more than poetry- this Bible story equips us with a lens with which to see God at work in

far more than just the hilltop experiences of life.

One of my favorite church history quotes is from Cyril of Alexandria in the 4th Century. In describing the full humanity of Jesus as well as his divinity, Cyril said, "What is not assumed is not saved." On this hilltop we get a glimpse of the full divinity of Jesus, the embodiment of the Word made flesh, the power and the glory. But it is only afterwards, down the hill and in the midst of the crowd - in Jesus' obvious compassionate connection with humanity - that God's glory is fully demonstrated. So it also happens in our day-to-day life.

I remember- very clearly- after I was first installed as an Associate Pastor in my first church position, right after the big service of installation in late May, the Senior Pastor/head of Staff, left for a month vacation out west- as he always did. And the Monday after that big church service I was called to Sandhills Hospital to share some prayers with the family of a Mrs. Gulick - who I had never met before, and who was new to town, but who was dying of liver failure.

Her family was gathered with her- and I spent the better part of that week sharing prayers with the family- as she slowly - but very surely left this earthly realm. Talk about coming down from a mountaintop experience... but in sharing in that time, it grounded me- very firmly, in the real need for prayer- both for that family - and for me, as I was trying to be as helpful as I could be for them.

It's winter now - so this next notion might help to warm us up a bit ... do you remember what it's like to go out in the backyard and catch fireflies? I remember the first time I accidentally smashed a lightning bug and its fluorescence blurred across my hand. I stood there transfixed in the darkness, staring at my skin still glowing from the little streak of glory left by that firefly.

That's what I imagine must have happened to Moses and Jesus. They got close to God's glory, brushed up against it, and it smeared onto them. They came away glowing. Encounter with God ought to do something to us, ought to change us somehow. It takes some prayer to ready us, but God equips us for every day life - every day.

I don't believe God intended to leave the glory of life limited to rare or summery mountaintop experiences. Our faith assumes the reality of close encounter with God in the everyday, in the simple and the mundane.

On this last Sunday before Lent, it's worthwhile to remember how *we've* been transfigured as a congregation over the last year - how we've glowed - from time to time; and how we might even be a transfiguring force in the world around us. Maybe that should be among the criteria we use to evaluate our life and work together: is any of God's glory being spread around through our ministry?

Here at Second we encounter God's glory most readily when we gather for worship in this beautiful space. The music, liturgy and prayers can lift us to heights beyond our earth-bound smallness.

But we also encounter God's glory in the open hospitality - especially for those who have taken up the

cause of BIHN and have labored so hard to make it work, and in our work in this city that makes real the love of Jesus for “the least of these.” The light of God’s glory can be seen in the faces of those to whom we extend care - those who are hurting and lonely and grieving.

What happens in the Transfiguration ought not to be confined only to those rare instances when we withdraw and go up the mountain to find God. We live in an unveiled time, when close encounters with God happens every day, thanks to the living presence of the risen Christ among us.

You and I and all of us together in this wonderful church family are called to be a Transfigured Community, to let the light so shine in us and through us that others may find a way to God, and be themselves transformed by the power of God’s love in Jesus Christ, who is the Light of the world. Amen.

*(Edwin Muir [1887-1959], poem entitled, The Transfiguration)