

Revelation on a mountaintop

A sermon by the Reverend Robert Bruce Edson in Emmanuel Episcopal Church, West Roxbury, Massachusetts, on the Feast of the Transfiguration of our Lord Jesus Christ, August 6, 2017.

And while he was praying, the appearance of his face changed and his clothes became dazzling white. Luke 9:29

After receiving the covenant in the presence of God on Mount Sinai, the face of Moses shines brightly. People are so awestruck by his appearance that they are reluctant to speak to him or even look him in the eye. He has to encourage them to come near and talk to him. Eventually, he wears a veil over his face and removes it only when going to the temple to pray.

In the Bible, revelations often happen on mountaintops, perhaps because they are seen as a place of strength. Moses was on a mountain when he first encountered God in the burning bush. Elijah had his experience with God on a mountain. Before beginning his ministry, Jesus went up on a mountain where he overcame his temptations. If you ever had a mystical spiritual experience in which God was very present and personal, you may have felt an inner glow.

This narrative of the Transfiguration of Christ on the highest peak in Palestine is both mystical and ethereal. Peter, James and John are with Jesus when his clothes become dazzling white and his face shines brightly. They are awestruck by this highly mystical experience of having revealed to them the full nature of Christ as the anointed one of God. The tableau is complete in the appearance of the historic figures of Moses and Elijah who represent the law and the prophets. As the vision of Moses and Elijah fades into the background, Jesus represents the old order giving way to the new as the fulfillment of all the law and the prophets. Christ's appearance in dazzling white is an affirmation that he is the true light of the world. For Peter, James and John, the Transfiguration of Christ is the high point in their understanding of the full nature of Christ revealed in a most dramatic way.

When I was ten years old, my father was suddenly very seriously ill. No one would tell me what happened. I went to bed that night knowing that he might not live. In the early hours of the morning, I had one of those dreams that you have just before waking up in which my father appeared clothed in bright white suit and was embracing my mother, as if to say goodbye. When I awoke, I learned that he had died. The date was August 6, the Feast of the Transfiguration. I was too young to know anything about the church calendar or the story of the Transfiguration. I have pondered the meaning of that dream for these many years since.

We think of awesome mountaintop experiences occurring during highly emotional times and during the stress of personal crisis, but spiritual revelations can also happen in ordinary times and circumstances. A breakthrough in understanding of a complex issue can be a high point in our spiritual lives. It is understandable to question the meaning of spiritual revelations. The personal presence of God can be felt anywhere, at any time, in a garden, in the woods, at the shore, out on the water or on a mountaintop. Some of my most intimate spiritual experiences have been while I was alone and thinking through things.

It is often under ordinary circumstances that God is revealed in simple but special ways that assure us of how much we are really loved. Whatever form those occasions take, we can draw strength and encouragement from knowing that God is personally closer to us than we realize. When distracted and under pressure we easily lose an awareness of God's close presence.

While Jesus remained steadfast during his time of testing and temptation before beginning his ministry, on the night before he died he felt forsaken and abandoned. It is when we are under pressure that we need to remember that we are upheld and sustained by God's personal presence.

This very mystical experience of the Transfiguration is another example of how Christ transforms and intensifies our relationship with God. We need never hide our face, but rejoice in the glory of God's presence everyday. God is known most intimately in the person and life of Christ who sustains our life together in the community of faith, the church. We are a community

of fallible but faithful people striving to know Christ and to make him known. The more we know God personally, the better we are able to model our lives after Christ. The less remote our relationship to God the more we reflect Christ's presence in all we say and do,

What the Transfiguration of Christ means for me is to remain open to seeing others in a new and better light. I can then appreciate them for who they really are. Too often we rely on first impressions that become locked in our minds. It is a mistake to dismiss people so easily. Bear in mind that the difficult people you encounter may be living with a burden of which you are unaware. To see them in a different light releases us from negative assumptions and rigid stereotypes.

The Transfiguration of Christ reaffirms that Christ welcomes all who come to him. Regardless of our conditions and circumstances, no one who believes in God is ever turned away. If you wonder why God hasn't given up on us it is because we are still a work in progress. Our personally close relationship with God in Christ can't be taken away from us.

It is our hope for Scott Gordon being baptized today that he will know and understand that from this day forward his bond with Christ is indissoluble. Being anointed marks Scott as Christ's own forever. We will support him in keeping that relationship close and personal. As God seeks the best in us, we bring out the best in each other. What better purpose can we have than that?