

The Last Sunday after Epiphany
February 23, 2020
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It was the height of summer, about 11 years ago, and I was seated on a massive, mossy greenstone boulder overlooking Burntside Lake near the Boundary Waters. It was summer vacation, and my children were gleefully running around family camp, learning how to pitch tents, tie ropes, and make what passes for bread in the North Woods over an open fire. Michael was somewhere out on the lake in a canoe, hoping to convince a northern to take a chance on his hook. And I sat on the rock, in a comfy Adirondack chair, with a huge pile of delicious books next to me waiting to be devoured, one by one, over the coming week.

But I wasn't reading. I wasn't thinking about the kids or Michael or what time lunch had to be ready. I was just staring out onto the lake, watching the sun dance and sparkle on the round, rolling waves. For the previous year I had been leading community organizing projects across the Episcopal Church, helping parishes and dioceses plan and lead effective, measurable initiatives toward the international effort to end extreme poverty. I had won two prestigious grants to fund my work, and each week I had jet off to a different corner of the Episcopal Church to train local leaders and help them launch their campaigns and then hone the skills they would need to successfully run those campaigns. The work was thrilling and impactful, specific to real people and initiating real change. *But something was missing.* I felt unmoored, disconnected, fragmented. Each day a different project, a different faith community in a different part of the church would consume my attention. These were good people, faithful people. I was a successful and sought-after ministerial entrepreneur. I had arrived! But something was missing. Deep down in my heart, in the place where we dare to whisper the truth to ourselves, down in the place where God knows to go to reach us, I knew something was wrong.

So I sat on a rock. Despite my accumulated exhaustion, I was awake, my mind crisp and wide and open. I sat on a rock. I sat on a rock for days. Books went untouched. Lunch went unmade. I sat on a rock – willing to hear or discover whatever I needed to hear or discover. Willing to surrender my carefully-made career plans, willing to loosen the death

grip on my illusion that I could, by sheer grit and willpower, manufacture and control my destiny. Yes, I would surrender if it would mean getting a handle on what was amiss. So I emptied my mind and sat on a rock.

Sometime during those days on the rock, I heard a voice – I don't know if it was "real," if it was in my head, or in my gut, or if anyone else, had they been there, could have heard it. I don't know if it was my inner teacher, my own voice, my imagination, or God's voice. And really – none of that mattered. What I heard was, simply, "Come back to me." or maybe "Get back to me." Just once. And something inside me cracked open and I began to see some truth – I realized that all this fancy, flying-around ministry had become disconnected from any kind of real relationship with God. My impressive grants and mission entrepreneurial efforts were creating change, and capacity – but in the process I had let go of the thread, the heartbeat, the connection to the "why"- why do it, for who, and for what? And even more than that, I had confused the essential spiritual discipline of steady, ordinary, enduring, faithful membership in a church community with the glamour of flying around giving sermons and spiritual leadership to people I did not know. I had sat on the rock – alive and awake, willing, and as close to maybe I'll ever come to relinquishing some significant amount of control. "Come back to me" was what I heard. And so, I did. And here I am.

Each of us, I would hope, has had at least one transfiguring moment in our lives. Some moment that we can't properly explain, but that profoundly and deeply touched and transformed us. Maybe it was an experience that set afire a part of ourselves previously closed or unknown. Maybe it was something that made real to us, even assured us, of the power and presence of the holy. What was it? Did we allow it, ultimately, to change us from that moment on?

This morning's Gospel is the story of Jesus' transfiguration. That moment when Jesus climbs the mountain, is consumed with fire and power, feels the full presence of God, and walks back down the mountain a changed person, an intensely private moment between Jesus and God, so private that much of it is obscured by a cloud. There are witnesses, of course, but despite everything - what they see they misunderstand – and then fear. In its essence it is a private, indescribable moment between Jesus and God. As theologian Sam Portaro puts it, "the Transfiguration is an artistic struggle to give voice to an intangible insight." We can't know what happened in the cloud. But we do know that God

surrounds Jesus, overcomes him, takes his breath away, and sets his heart on fire. And we know that that encounter with God changed Jesus profoundly. “After that strange experience on the hill,” Portaro writes, “Jesus possessed something he had not known or evidenced before. He bore within and expressed without the unmistakable assurance of one who knew his place; he knew he was loved and chosen by God. That knowledge was his authority and the core of his integrity; he knew it so surely he could never relinquish it, even to the power of death. He was changed, and everyone who saw him saw that change. He was transfigured. The brooding shadow of doubt – doubt over his own place in God’s order and affections – was replaced (forever) by the clear light of assurance.”

Jesus’ transfiguration cannot be our transfiguration. That was Jesus’ private moment, made for Jesus. But in that private moment with all of its mystery and silences beyond our grasp, there are clues in the telling that deepen our understanding about the nature of transformation. We know, for example, that Jesus was extraordinary in his ability to be always in relation to God – always, without fail, to be awake to God. And it was in his “awakeness,” that he was *able* to hear what God had to give him. Jesus felt God, heard God, was transfigured by God because he was unceasingly awake to God. Jesus *expected* God to show up and guide him. Jesus *anticipated* God’s presence and revelation. Jesus *waited upon* crazy miracles and strange encounters in unlikely places. Jesus was just awake, making a lifetime out of clearing a big, open, receptive places in his heart in hopeful anticipation of God showing up, and showing up to give what he most needed.

Years ago I had a spiritual director who was fond of making this exact point. Like a mantra, over and over, he said to me, “Devon, our only job, the only thing we are asked or required to do by God is to stay awake – to be awake to God.” Or as the poet Mary Oliver would phrase it: “To pay attention – this is our endless and proper work.” We are asked, simply, to be Christ-like in our ability to be awake. To recognize in moments of heightened emotion, dramatic insight, or deep, intense feeling as nothing less than the presence of God in our midst. To recognize them as our own, private moments of transfiguration and to take away from them assurance of God’s love for us, and a willingness to give the experience the authority it deserves – to allow it to mold and shape us.

Jesus was also *willing* – willing, even eager, for God to set his heart on fire. Most of us kind of bumble our way through life, falling, if we’re lucky, into our moments of

transfiguration. But Jesus invited these moments, called out for them, put himself in places he might receive them. He was willing to be set aflame and to give control over to God. The best illustration of this is a story that comes from the early Christian desert fathers. It is a story that tells of Abbot Joseph who came to the elder Abbot Lot and said: “Father, according as I am able, I keep my little rule, and my little fast, my prayer, meditation and contemplative silence; and according as I am able I strive to cleanse my heart of thoughts. Now what more should I do? The elder rose up in reply and stretched out his hands to heaven, and his fingers became like ten lamps of fire. He said: Why not be totally changed into fire?”

To be *willing*, we have to first confront our *willfulness*. As Gerald May, psychologist and theologian once wrote, *willfulness* must become *willingness* if we are to live in the world of the Spirit. “*Willingness* implies a surrendering of one’s self-separateness,” he writes, “an entering-into, an immersion in the deepest processes of life itself. It is a realization that one already is a part of some ultimate cosmic process and it is a commitment to participation in that process. In contrast, *willfulness* is a setting of oneself apart from the fundamental essence of life in an attempt to master, direct, control, or otherwise manipulate existence. More simply, *willingness* is saying yes to the mystery of being alive in each moment. *Willfulness* is saying no, or perhaps more commonly, “Yes, but. . .”

Which leads us to control. If we have eyes to see it, in all the Gospel stories and circumstances about Jesus, and especially in those leading up to his transfiguration – we see Jesus, time and again, as having an unrelenting capacity to surrender himself to the will of God -- to let go, to wrap his brain around the illusion – the lie - of control. “The opposite of faith is not doubt,” writes Richard Rohr, “the opposite of faith – is control.” Nicely said, but if you happen to be a “one” on the Enneagram like me, a better quote might be from David Foster Wallace: “Everything I’ve ever let go of has claw marks on it.” The point is that we are all vulnerable, to different degrees maybe, to the illusion of control – and letting go of it is where the rubber meets the road in spiritual practice. Easy to say, hard to do. To be in control of our destiny, health, career, relationships, and finances seems to be an unquestionable cultural value. And on some small level it may be true, but not on the bigger level. Our bodies, our souls, and especially our failures teach us this as we get older. We are clearly not in control. This is not a negative discovery, but a thrilling discovery of divine providence; being led, used, and guided; having an inner purpose and a sense of personal vocation; and owning one’s destiny as a gift from God.

Learning that we are not in control situates us correctly in the universe. We know we are being guided, and our reliance on that guidance is precisely what allows our journey to happen. What freedom and peace this can bring!

In the end, if we want transformation, if we want guidance and growth and deepening, if we want the kind of richness that only God can give, if we want to walk up a proverbial mountain and have our hearts catch aflame, *it matters what we bring to the party*.

Remembering that God can reach us regardless of whether or not we've sunk our claws into the illusion of control – maybe the lesson for today is that willingness and openness, being awake and expectant for God to show up *is within our ability* – and is what, if we can muster it, we can bring to the relationship.

References and Sources:

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