

Feb. 27, 2022 Transfiguration Sunday

Luke 9:28-36

You Can't Un-see It

I want to start out by giving some bad advice to husbands, and then I want to teach you a Hebrew word. First the bad advice. When your wife asks you do something you don't want to do, tell her you can't do it because you are having vision problems. And when she asks what's wrong with your vision, say, "I just can't see myself doing that." (And then, run).

Now the Hebrew word: *Shekinah*. It means "glory," specifically the glory associated with God's visible presence. It's something people in the Old Testament generally weren't allowed to see directly or clearly. They could see it through other means, like the pillar of cloud and the pillar of fire that led them. But they weren't allowed to see it directly. In one rare instance, Moses got to see it and it made him cover His face with a veil. Isaiah also got to see it in a heavenly vision and was left fearful because of his own unholiness.

In our gospel reading today, Peter, James and John get to see God's shekinah. And it causes them to see Jesus and a lot of other things in a whole new light.

Often in human life we find ourselves struggling to see something or someone in the dim murkiness of our lives and then a light shines, and we say, "Oh, now I can see clearly!" That kind of ah-hah moment happened to Peter, James, and John on the mountain with Jesus. They thought they knew who Jesus was, but after this experience they saw him in a new light.

This was such an unusual experience it lends itself to retelling. Jesus takes them on the mountain to pray quietly. And while there, Jesus begins to glow, almost as if he were radioactive. He is shining brighter than the brightest whites in a modern laundry. The disciples cover their eyes, the light is so bright. I can imagine them peeking between their fingers, they see that Jesus is flanked by Moses and Elijah. Moses -- whose face had shown with God's glory when he received the Ten Commandments on Mount Sinai. Elijah -- whose journey into heaven was so lit by God's glory that the chariot seemed to be on fire. Jesus -- shining with God's glory-- in Hebrew the word is Shekinah. Moses and Elijah reflecting that glory in the

same way that the law and the prophets reflect God's Shekinah. What an experience! It transfigured Jesus and how they saw him.

The experience of the three disciples seeing Jesus transfigured changed their way of looking at Jesus, and it also changed the way they saw God. It even transfigured their view of human kind. Oh, that we, too, might see clearly in the light of God's Shekinah glory. Their view of Jesus was changed.

Before this they had seen him as a wonderfully insightful rabbi with remarkable healing powers. Now they experience him shining with the Shekinah glory of God. He's not reflecting God's glory. God's glory is radiating from Jesus. For a Jewish person to say this, or even think this, was blasphemy. We'll say it for them. Jesus is God. He is that unique individual in all of history who is fully human (they had seen him tired, hungry, irritated) and yet fully divine (the heavenly voice calls Jesus: my Son, my Chosen). Now they realize that to know Jesus is to know God. What is God like? Look at Jesus. What is God's attitude about us humans? Get to know Jesus and his attitudes.

The experience of the faithful over the centuries since this experience on the mountain is that the transfigured Jesus is not a momentary aberration but the truth about Jesus. Jesus is God, and God's Shekinah glory does radiate from him.

Their view of God changed also. This new insight about Jesus being God changed their view of God. Since Jesus, the very involved rabbi, is God, it is clear that God is very involved in human life. No longer could they view God simply as the awesome other. God is present in their lives because Jesus is present in their lives. Simon Peter, James and John had never heard the word "incarnation," but they were experiencing God in flesh as they were experiencing Jesus. They now saw, in a new light, what God had been trying to show to his chosen people from the beginning: God wants to be known by us humans. He even takes the ultimate step of becoming one of us so that we might see God in images that we understand.

This insight still holds true today. God is available to human knowing. Christians today recognize God's involvement in our lives through our study of God's self-revelation in Holy Scripture and our experience of the Risen Christ, God's Son. We say this, right?: "It's a God thing." What do we mean by that? We mean that God is involved in it.

Peter, John and James were seeing a God thing. Their view of people also changed. If God is involved in human lives, then humans must be of value or God wouldn't bother with them. The Gospel narrative we heard today hasn't yet reached the account of Jesus' death on behalf of us humans, but we who are aware of Christ's sacrifice realize human life has a worth that invites us to respect the dignity of every human being.

Not only is every human life worth caring about, but those humans, Moses and Elijah, seen with Jesus, model for the rest of us humans the possibility for reflecting God's glory. Jesus radiated God's Shekinah glory. Moses and Elijah reflected that glory. We know enough about Moses and Elijah's human foibles to see that if they can reflect God's glory as they stand by Jesus then we, too, can reflect God's glory as we stand up for Jesus. As Paul wrote to the Church in Corinth: "We all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of God, are being changed into his likeness from one degree of glory to another."

Francis Dorff has a wonderful story called "The Rabbi's Gift," which illustrates how our treatment of others can be changed as we look for Jesus, the Messiah. The story goes like this:

There was a famous monastery which once had been full of monks and visitors seeking spiritual guidance. But the monastery had fallen on dry years when their spirituality level was very low. Few pilgrims came to seek guidance, and few young people gave themselves to become monks. At last, there was only a handful of elderly monks going about their work, their prayer, their study with heavy hearts. The only time their spirit seemed to lift was when the word went out that the rabbi was walking in the woods. You see, in the woods near the monastery, there was a small hut that this rabbi had constructed as a place of retreat, and he came from time to time to fast and pray. And when the monks in the monastery knew he was fasting and praying, they felt supported by his prayer.

One day, the abbot of the monastery, hearing that the rabbi was walking in the woods, decided to go see him. And when he reached the little hut, there was the rabbi standing in the doorway with his arms outstretched, as if he had been standing there for some time to welcome the abbot, who had given no notice of his visit. They greeted one another, and then went in the simple hut where there was a table with a book of scripture opened on the table. They sat there, silently prayed, and then the abbot began to

weep. He poured out his concern for the monastery and for the spiritual health of the monks. Finally, the rabbi said, 'You seek a teaching from me and I have one for you. It is a teaching which I will say to you and then I will never repeat. When you share this teaching with the monks, you are to say it once and then never to repeat it. The teaching is this. Listen carefully. "The Messiah is among you."

Well, when the abbot heard that teaching, he thanked the rabbi. He went back to the monastery to gather the monks and to tell them the teaching of the rabbi. He told him, as he was instructed, that he would say the teaching once, and then they were to talk about it no more. "Listen carefully," he said. "The teaching is this: One of us is the Messiah." It wasn't exactly what the rabbi had said, but they began to look at one another in a whole new light. Is Brother John the messiah? Or Father James? Am I the messiah?

In the days to come, as they went about their prayer life and their work and their study of scripture, they began to treat one another in a whole new light. Each one of them might be the messiah, and this new treatment of one another, this new sense of expectation, was noted by the few pilgrims who came. And soon the word spread. What a spirit of concern and compassion and expectation can be felt at the monastery!

Young people began to offer themselves in service. Pilgrims began to come in great number, all because they looked at each other as people of worth.

The experience on the Mount of Transfiguration was unique and will never be repeated. However, the insights gained that day and though our present consideration reverberates through history. Simon Peter, James and John saw things in a whole new light. Jesus is God. God is involved in human life. Human life is precious in God's sight. What a momentous vision! Oh, that God's glory, radiating in the Risen Jesus, may be so reflected in me and you that people everywhere may see clearly in that light that Jesus is Lord; that God cares about every human being; and that we humans are invited to share God's glory!