

Transfiguration  
The Last Sunday after the Epiphany  
Exodus 24:12-18, Matthew 17:1-9  
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I'll never forget the day my friend Suzi's husband died. It was a Saturday in November about ten years ago. Suzi is also an Episcopal priest and we were gathered with five or six hundred Episcopalians for our annual convention in a Westin Hotel. We were about to begin a celebratory Eucharist when the bishop made an announcement. Suzi's husband had died suddenly of a heart attack while on a golf vacation. He asked us to pray for him and Suzi and her family. I'll never forget that day; Suzi's stricken face, her teenage children around her, and 600 people witnessing her grief.

Last night John and I attended the wedding of Suzi and Bob, who coincidentally has sung in John's choir for twenty years. We had nothing to do with their meeting but what a joyful event it was! Bob has gone through his own cloud of grief. When we first met him he was married with a young daughter, and we knew him when that relationship disintegrated and ended in divorce. We witnessed the pain of raising a child by two separated parents. And here they were, Bob and Suzi, their adult children standing up for them, all their faces radiating joy.

This morning we heard about the presence of clouds in our journeys in the story from the Hebrew Scriptures. Moses is told by God to go up on the mountain and a cloud covers the mountain for six days. On the seventh day the voice of God comes out of the cloud inviting him to stay on the mountain. And he does, for forty days and forty nights.

It is no accident that we read this passage on the last Sunday before we begin the forty days and forty nights of Lent (count them from Ash Wednesday to Holy Saturday, not counting Sundays, as they are still days of celebration!) All of us will have a time in our life when circumstances, depression, grief, illness, anger, force us into a cloud that can last a day, weeks, months, or even years. It is a strange thing that our church asks us, even if this happens to be a joyful period of our lives, to deliberately enter the cloud.

Imagine being in a cloud. It closes in on you, limits your vision of the outside world, forces you to focus on your other senses, focuses you inward. Have you decided what your Lenten practice will be? How you might deliberately live in the cloud?

Traditionally this means deprivation of the senses. You might give up eating meat, or stop drinking, or start exercising, practices that help us focus on our health, or basic needs. You might take on a practice of the mind. Perhaps you, like a couple in our congregation, will

watch only Spanish language movies and news, to help hone your skills, or perhaps read only books written by immigrants, or African-American authors. You could even read the Bible everyday! Choose a practice that focuses your mind on new thoughts or new worlds. Or you might choose a practice of the heart. Maybe for Lent you will try hard to stop irritating your sister, or spouse, or whomever pushes your buttons. Or maybe you will focus on a new attitude for encounters on the bus, or at school or work, or when watching the news. Practice a change of heart.

This past Tuesday we began the “Journey in Faith” class which will continue throughout Lent. We left up the papers from our first exercise around the sanctuary; there are 14 chart papers, each with a quote and a picture which represents an aspect of Christian, and particularly Episcopal or Anglican, spirituality. I hope you might reflect on them after communion, or after the service. On Tuesday I asked folks to choose the one which spoke most to them. The one that had the most votes was this one “practicing an earthly spirituality which values the goodness of creation – finding the extraordinary in the ordinary.”

Finding the extraordinary in the ordinary – ironically, that is the opposite of the experience recorded in this Sunday’s gospel. The story of the transfiguration is the story of very ordinary people experiencing extraordinary things! a real mountain top experience! First, Jesus radiates light, changing from the inside out. Then two dead prophets show up and then disappear. A cloud descends and the voice of God says “This is my beloved, in whom I am well pleased. Listen to him.” And then Jesus says “Do not be afraid!” as if fear isn’t exactly the normal reaction to such strange events!

Notice though, amidst this extraordinary event, there is still the cloud. The cloud is the contrast to the light. Out of the cloud comes the voice of God. This Lent, choose a practice that puts you in the cloud, and may it be a practice that helps you to see the light, to hear the voice of God, and be transformed.