

The Last Sunday after Epiphany

Mark 9: 2-9

The Reverend Smokey Oats

In his classic The Structure of Scientific Revolutions, Thomas Kuhn says that scientific advances occur when someone creates/discovered a new perspective, a new model, a new approach to reality. After such a breakthrough, a new way of thinking, previously thought to be impossible, comes to life. Scientific progress, Kuhn goes on to contend, is less the result of harder and longer work applying the scientific method to problems than it is the result of an “insight”, a flash of brilliance, an “aha” that opens the way for a paradigm shift to occur.

A few years ago at a symposium in St. Louis, Rabbi Edwin Friedman, noted author and family systems therapist, spoke of the need to get emotionally and mentally “unstuck,” which is a more psychologically oriented way of describing just what Kuhn was writing about. Citing such historical examples as the 4 minute mile, the sound barrier, the theory of evolution and even polytheism before the Biblical prophets, Friedman spoke of the mental barriers facing each of us. His point was that sometimes you have to drastically rearrange or even completely replace the mental furniture of your mind before new insights, new learnings, new revelations can take seat. You have to suspend judgment based on the old rules, and consider the possibility of a whole new thought pattern and means of deciding.

When Peter, James, and John climb the mountain with Jesus, they have little or no idea of the new “perspective” they’re about to enter, of the paradigm shift that’s about to occur. Luke’s account says they even went to sleep – hardly the kind of response one would expect from people about to witness something that would make Spielberg seem dull.

Of all the personal interactions Jesus had with these disciples during his ministry, the Transfiguration is most remarkable because it opened a new approach to reality for the disciples, a new way of thinking about the person of Jesus. While these disciples didn’t move directly or immediately into believing that Jesus was the Divine Logos or the 2nd Person of the Trinity, they could no longer see him as only an itinerant, teaching, healing, prophecy-predicting, part-time carpenter/part-time preacher from Nazareth.

With the Transfiguration of Jesus on that mountain, those with eyes to see and ears to hear were offered a very different place for their heads to be regarding who this Jesus was and is.

Some of us have been blessed with mountain-top experiences, personal transfigurations, moments when our assumptions were assailed, our old thought patterns were pounded into a different shape, our very lives were re-ordered. Some of us have enjoyed occasions when we’ve seen the hand of God at work in our own or the lives of those around us with piercing clarity, heard that still small

voice that God so often uses to tell of his love for us and to summon us beyond ourselves, had preconceptions challenged and our priorities changed because from that moment, from that instance of a close encounter of the divine kind, everything was different, life was never the same, the cat, theologically speaking, was out of the bag.

Many of us have not had such a tangible, dateable, profoundly knowable experience of God. No bells or whistles or sirens sounded in the spiritual journey. A few are even a little nervous about the thought of climbing the mountain. That's understandable, since mountains and their tops are dangerous, unpredictable places where the wind blows where it will, beyond any earthly control.

But not having been to the mountain's top does not mean we don't or can't know God. It simply suggests that shifting our world view, our paradigms about who and what God is, coming to a new perspective about God's place in our lives and our place in God's kingdom happens in a kinder, gentler, slower and less dramatic way.

Whether you be a mountain climber or not, to sustain you in your spiritual journey there are the Scriptures, the sacraments, the church, daily prayer, the providence of God, the workings of the Holy Spirit, and the rhythm of the liturgical year. {Lent} The intention/point/purpose of all of these is the same as the

transfiguring moment for the 3 disciples described in today's Gospel: to give us new ears with which to hear and new eyes with which to behold the Lamb of God.

Reminded of some stories to press the point and urge you on in whatever transfiguring moment or form God has for you.

1. A Native American and his friend were in downtown NY City, walking near Times Sq. in Manhattan. It was during the noon lunch hour and the streets were filled with people. Cars were honking their horns, taxicabs were squealing around corners, sirens were wailing, and the sound of the city were almost deafening. Suddenly, the Native American said, "I hear a cricket."

His friend said, "What? You must be crazy. You couldn't possibly hear a cricket in all this Noise!"

"No, I'm sure of it," the Native American said.

The Native American listened carefully for a moment, and then walked down the street to a big cement planter where some shrubs were growing. He looked into the bushes, beneath the branches, and sure enough, he located a small cricket. His friend was utterly amazed. "That's incredible," said the friend. "You must have superhuman ears!"

"No," said the Native American. "My ears are no different from yours. It all depends on what you're listening for."

“But that can’t be,” said the friend. “I could never hear a cricket in this noise.”

“Yes, you could,” came the reply. “It depends on what is really important to you. Here, let me show you.” He reached into his pocket, pulled out a few coins, and discreetly dropped them on the sidewalk. And then, with the noise of the crowded street still blaring in their ears, they noticed every head within 20 feet turn and look to see if the money that tinkled on the pavement was theirs. “See what I mean?” asked the Native American. “It all depends on what’s important to you.”

Take a few moments. Listen for God Today. It’ll be the most important voicemail you’ll ever get, leading to a new perspective, a new life in Christ.

2. Anna Quindlen, columnist and novelist, gave a commencement address at Villanova University. Here is part of what she had to say:

“I found one of my best teachers on the boardwalk at Coney Island maybe 15 years ago. It was December, and I was doing a story about how the homeless survive in the winter months. He and I sat on the edge of the wooden supports, dangling our feet over the side, and he told me about his schedule: panhandling the boulevard when the summer crowds were gone, sleeping in a church when the temperature went below freezing, hiding from the police amidst the Tilt-a-Whirl and the Cyclone and some of the other seasonal rides. But he told me that most of the time he stayed on the Boardwalk, facing the water, just the way

we were sitting now, even when it got cold and he had to wear his newspapers after he read them. And I asked him why. Why didn't he go to one of the shelters? Why didn't he check himself into the hospital for detox? Why didn't he try to reconnect with his family?

“And he just stared out at the ocean and said, ‘Look at the view, young lady. Look at the view.’

She finished her address saying, “And that's the last thing I have to tell you today, words of wisdom from a man with not a dime in his pocket, no place to go, nowhere to be. Look at the view. You'll never be disappointed.”

Keep your eyes open. God is in this place, in your life, in those around you, ever ready to show you who and whose you are.

3. It is said that when the great Rabbi Israel Baal Shem-Tov saw misfortune threatening the Jews, it was his custom to go into a certain part of the forest to meditate. There he would light a fire, say a special prayer, and the miracle that was needed would be accomplished. Whatever misfortune that was facing God's people would be averted.

Later, when his disciple, the celebrated Magid of Mezritch had occasion, under similar circumstances, to intercede with heaven, he would go to the same place in the forest and implore: “Master of the Universe, listen! I do not know how

to light the fire, but I am still able to say the prayer” – and again the miracle would take place.

Then it fell to rabbi Israel of Rizhyn to lead his people beyond their present misfortunes. Sitting in his armchair, holding his head in his hands, he cried to God: “I am unable to light the fire and I do not know the prayer; I cannot even find the right place in the forest. All I can do is tell the story, and this must be sufficient.” And it was.

Don't be quiet. Tell the story of what God is doing in your life. It just may be that you've been cast as a player in someone else's Transfiguration. And don't worry about wearing white before Easter!