

John F. Carter
March 6, 2011

St. John's Episcopal Church
Last Epiphany

OUT OF THE BLUE ON MYSTERY MOUNTAIN

Each year I look forward to watching as much of the Academy Awards ... as I can handle. This year I was struck by the emoting befuddlement of some (not all) of the Oscar recipients. After ascending the steps to the high place (altar?) many seemed to suffer from loss of oxygen. The fear, trembling and random nattering resembled the response of someone who has just had an encounter with raw divine power. For example, I think of Peter, James and John in today's gospel in their reaction to an overpowering revelation.

What does the transfiguration mean? I'm not clear. Who was it for? The disciples, Jesus, us? Did it really happen as Matthew describes it? I don't know, but does that necessarily matter? How do we speak of the transfiguration of Jesus on the mountaintop? Perhaps indirectly.

So, let's try the circuitous path with many switchbacks up this high mystery mountain. We begin our journey in 664, at a Convent in Whitby, England, where Prioress Hilda presided over an historic council. The Roman Church had set the agenda. You may recall that for centuries England had been part of the Roman Empire. The grip of the Empire was slipping by this time.

It seems that the Celtic branch of the Christian faith in Ireland and parts of Scotland had been growing in a manner deemed by Rome to be subversive and unorthodox. Celtic Christianity had grown apart from the mainstream. It was a syncretistic blend: love of Christ and druidism with a creation-centered spirituality. It lacked the Roman conquest mentality. The Celts were circular in their thinking, guile and creativity. Witness the spirals in their knots, art work and manuscript illuminations. Perhaps the most well known symbol of their faith is the Celtic Cross. To the familiar intersection of vertical and horizontal axes, is added a circular band around the upper portion of the cruciform.

If Roman Christianity was imperial, linear, rational, dogmatic, left-brained and aggressive; Celtic spirituality was intuitive, open, emotional, circular, right-brained and mystical. The Celts believed in the Trinity with a passion, but their passion was not for Rome. They were independent and Rome did not like this. The Council at Whitby, which was more about power than God, was a relatively peaceful gathering. The Celts acceded to the demands of the papal delegation, which meant obedience to the mother church in Rome. Rome won and the Celts lost.

Or so it seemed. The emissaries from Ireland said “yes”, and then returned home to do what they wanted, which was to quietly sustain Celtic spirituality. It was a brilliant maneuver. To have forcefully defied Rome, a superior military power, could have meant extinction. To comply meant at least survival. What was it Jesus said about *not resisting evil*?

In today’s gospel, Peter with his impulse to build booths or tents for Jesus, Elijah and Moses, displays more of Roman sensibility than a Celtic one. Indeed, one of the largest “booths” in the world, St. Peter’s Basilica in Rome, was built to honor this very human disciple. From the Sears Tower in Chicago to the Burj Khalifa in Dubai, from the Tower of Babel to the Eiffel Tower, men (I use the word advisedly) have been inclined to construct tall buildings, obelisks or other massive monuments, dedicating them to God, their lovers or themselves.

Are you still with me as we meander up the rough trail of “mystery mountain”?

The Celts offered something different. They felt and understood God’s presence in special “thin places”. A “thin place” is where, if even for only a fleeting moment, the veil between the Spirit and us is lifted. Circles of rocks, a natural spring, a grove of trees, streams, rivers, hills and mountain passes might be thin places. Sometimes when I poke my head outside after being indoors for much of the day, there is a “thinness” in the feel of the wind on my face or the sun on my head, or the glimpse of a hawk flying over a field. Perhaps anywhere is a “thin place”.

There is a mindfulness in the Celtic approach to encounters between God’s spirit and human spirit. You do not have to be a Celt or druid to have this kind of soul attunement. We all have it, though it might have fallen asleep. In a Eurocentric culture such as ours, there are many accretions of enlightenment rationalism that may inhibit our natural responsiveness to the numinous. We try to “make sense” of mystery where sense cannot be made. We may be more comfortable with squares, straight lines and rectangles than with circles, spirals or spheres. But God in creation is ever close at hand, and even if we are slumbering, we can be easily awoken.

Celtic spirituality would find nothing peculiar about the transfiguration of Jesus. The disciples were experiencing a really “thin place”, as mountain tops often are.

The weather in high mountains is characterized by mercurial fluctuations in temperature and conditions. There are records of snowfall on Mount Washington in New Hampshire in July and August. The impermanence of life is rarely planer than on a high peak where blue, placid sky can devolve into a powerful squall with roaring wind, rain and

snow. In many cultures and religions mountains have long been associated with a sacred energy and presence that has many names.

Certainly, there are many mountaintop revelations in the Judeo-Christian tradition. God does not show up just to socialize! Usually, instruction follows revelation. In today's well-known story from the book of Exodus, Moses goes up to the top of Mount Sinai. After his ascent, clouds cover the mountaintop for six days, echoing the first six days of creation. Mountain mists and clouds are mysterious and sacred. They lift and reveal and then cover and conceal. (As Joni Mitchell sang, "I really don't know clouds at all.") God reveals himself to Moses and then instructs him with Torah, the gift of the Law. God's presence (*shekinah*) and glory (*Yahweh kavod*) is in the cloud, which will lead the nomadic people of Israel in the wilderness. The Risen Christ himself is the new *shekinah*.

Peter's idea of constructing booths was a very natural response. I can certainly relate to it. Imagine your emotional and mental state if Jesus had recently informed you, a beloved friend of his, that he was going to suffer and die a torturous death. Then he takes you up to a high mountain peak. Breathless from your upward journey, suddenly Moses and Elijah appear out of the blue in the crisp, clear alpine air. What's more, they are talking with Jesus. ((What are they talking about? We don't know.)) Everything is clear and lucid then abruptly confusing and fearsome. Does that sequence ever happen to you? In his awkward perplexity, Peter immediately wants to enshrine the three men by building three dwellings. This is his "Oscar" moment. But it's the wrong speech. Suddenly, to make things even more disorienting, a bright cloud appears and overshadows everyone.

An aside: Some years back, Deborah and I were trekking in the Annapurna range in Nepal about 13,000' up, surrounded by peaks twice as high. The sky had been astonishingly clear and blue. Then quite suddenly, fog and mist started pouring in through the notch from the valley below, transfiguring the landscape and even our faces. It would have been easy to get lost in the fog. Mist and mystery, wonderment and fear befell us.

Back to the Transfiguration ... Then God speaks out of the cloud, "*This is my beloved Son with whom I am well pleased. Listen to him.*" Again, revelation comes first, then instruction. Understandably, the three disciples are terrified and fall to the ground. In his panic Peter fails to see the primacy of Jesus revealed by the fact that only he is left when the fog clears. Seeing the distress of Peter, James and John, Jesus comes over and touches them and tells them to get up and not be afraid. The hand that touches them is there for us. The voice that says to not be afraid is there for us too.

So by now we have reached the summit. What do we find? What revelation and instruction do we receive by entering into the mountain top experience of Peter, James and John? If all we see is cloud and mist, that is all right. Do we understand Jesus better? In The Religious Case Against Belief, James Carse writes that Jesus “is the most misunderstood and enigmatic person who ever lived. He is both the best known and the least known of all human beings.”

Can we live with that paradox? Can we see that Jesus as sacred mystery is inviting us to “thin places” where we might stumble upon the love of God?

Perhaps that is enough.

Matthew 17:1-9

Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and his brother John and led them up a high mountain, by themselves. ²And he was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became dazzling white. ³Suddenly there appeared to them Moses and Elijah, talking with him. ⁴Then Peter said to Jesus, “Lord, it is good for us to be here; if you wish, I will make three dwellings here, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.” ⁵While he was still speaking, suddenly a bright cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud a voice said, “This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!” ⁶When the disciples heard this; they fell to the ground and were overcome by fear. ⁷But Jesus came and touched them, saying, “Get up and do not be afraid.” ⁸And when they looked up, they saw no one except Jesus himself alone. ⁹As they were coming down the mountain, Jesus ordered them, “Tell no one about the vision until after the Son of Man has been raised from the dead.”