

*Transfigured Moments*

Today is Transfiguration Sunday. This peculiar holiday shows up every year in the church's calendar as the bridge between the seasons of Epiphany and Lent, between the twinkling star and the deep wilderness, between the call of Jesus' disciples and his journey to the cross.

Scripture Reading

**Mark 9:2-9**

*Jesus took with him Peter and James and John, and led them up a high mountain apart, by themselves. And he was transfigured before them, and his clothes became dazzling white, such as no one on earth could bleach them. And there appeared to them Elijah with Moses, who were talking with Jesus. Then Peter said to Jesus, 'Rabbi, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.' He did not know what to say, for they were terrified. Then a cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud there came a voice, 'This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!' Suddenly when they looked around, they saw no one with them anymore, but only Jesus. As they were coming down the mountain, he ordered them to tell no one about what they had seen, until after the Son of Man had risen from the dead.*

Andy Goldsworthy is a sculptor from Scotland. He is known for taking natural objects – sticks and stones, moss and leaves – and arranging them into incredibly beautiful, and quite often, absolutely temporary works of art. Recently I saw a documentary about his work and I was completely captivated. The film begins with Goldsworthy traveling to the shore where he proceeds to take pieces of driftwood, hundreds and hundreds of pieces, which he then stacks and overlaps to create a massive structure directly in the path of the incoming tide. When the water comes in, it envelopes and fills the sculpture and gradually dismantles it. The change itself becomes the work of art.

My favorite sculpture was an intricate knitting of dried stalks fastened at angles with thorns. The whole thing hung somehow, invisibly, from a high tree branch. When a breeze came by, the weaving swayed, and I was amazed that this fragile piece could withstand the force. Until a stiffer wind came along that is, and then the whole thing collapsed. I was completely taken in by the way in one moment it seemed to defy gravity, and how in the next, all of it fell to the ground in pieces. It made me wince to see such beauty and such effort disappear, just like that.

I realized then how Goldsworthy's art speaks a truth about existence. His art imitates life – its resilience and its fragility, its durability and its transience. I was also struck by how such ordinary elements, things around us all the time that we pass by without paying any attention, can astonish us when we are able to look at them with fresh eyes.

The film ends with sparkling silver shapes flying up and filling the air only to fall and disappear a split second later. I couldn't figure out what I was looking at until the camera zoomed out to show that it was Andy, his arms full of snow. He threw all of it high into the air. It shimmered and then vanished. It was so simple – and we are so tired of looking at it right now – but I was completely surprised. The snow was transfigured, and it made me think of the misty cloud on the

mountain where the disciples had followed Jesus and the moment when it was Jesus himself who was shimmering. He pulsed with light, a light so bright that even Moses and Elijah, dead men from the other side of heaven's door, could be seen.

The Bible is full of such moments when the door cracks open between this world and a wider reality. Moses meets God in a burning bush. Jacob finds a ladder full of angels. Job hears God's voice out of the whirlwind. The disciples encounter Christ when he breaks bread on the road to Emmaus.

The way Scripture describes such luminous moments may not be the language we would use, and we don't often talk about such things in our lives, but I believe that for all of us there are moments when heaven peeks through to earth, when the veil is lifted and grace steps in, or beauty takes over, or love pours out and overwhelms us with its power. We might dismiss it because it only lasts for a moment, but if we pay attention, I believe we may also discover that it's enough to sustain us. The transfiguration of Jesus happened in a flash, but it was a gift given to the disciples and to us as we stand on the edge of Lent, to remind us that in the long walk to the cross, something larger is also at work.

Two years ago on Valentine's day one of my dearest friends died. Susan was also my closest colleague in the work I do in the wider church. We were friends for 20 years. We worked together nearly every day for 15 of them. On the day she died, I happened to be in Village Hall when I received the phone call that she was gone.

Last year, on the weekend between the anniversary of her death and her birthday, I invited several of our mutual friends to have dinner at her favorite restaurant. We were so glad to be together to remember and celebrate her. We were also so engaged in our conversation that it took us a while to realize it was taking a very long time for our food to arrive. More than an hour had gone by since we placed our order. Our server went back to the kitchen to check. The manager of the restaurant came out to apologize. He explained that our order had been misplaced and our meals were only now being prepared.

When the food was finally ready, the manager led a procession of servers from the kitchen to our table. It felt like church. It felt like communion. After our plates were set in front of us, he then announced to us that there would be no charge for dinner. We were surprised and we started to laugh because somehow by God's ingenuity, it suddenly seemed plausible to all of us that Susan had orchestrated this whole thing – that she was the one who misplaced our meal ticket so that we would linger together longer, or that she had just taken out her American Express card and picked up everyone's tab, or that she had pulled this young manager aside and in her gently persuasive way explained to him the meaning of extravagant hospitality. I remember feeling an overwhelming urge to get up and go to the kitchen to see if Susan was there. Of course, she wasn't. And of course, she was. She was with us in this communion meal, in our laughter, in our love for her and hers for us, in the life we were blessed to share and the life which is hers now in eternity.

It also dawned on me how this group around the table having dinner had been transfigured. Months earlier, these same people were suffering, grief stricken as we planned a worship service in Sue's memory for all the churches in the Massachusetts Conference. But on this night, joy had

returned and we were delighted. Our beloved friend is no longer with us, but for a moment, by God's grace, the door between this world and the next was opened and we caught sight of her.

Athanasius, an early Christian theologian, put it this way for us – More often than not, “our experience of God is like walking into a room the moment after God has stepped out. We get the glimmer, the sense, the scent, the aura, but not the presence.” Not the fullness of God's presence anyway, not a presence that we can hold onto and keep and manage. God's love transcends this world and yet the world is also so immersed in it that at any moment, if we are ready for it, open to it, God may show us a glimmer, give us a sense or a scent, or surround us with an aura that catches us, surprises us in a way that reminds of how good this life is, and how love lasts. Life is both fleeting and eternal, and the love that is forever is enough to sustain us all along the way.