

²⁸About eight days after Jesus said this, he took Peter, John and James with him and went up onto a mountain to pray. ²⁹As he was praying, the appearance of his face changed, and his clothes became as bright as a flash of lightning. ³⁰Two men, Moses and Elijah, ³¹appeared in glorious splendor, talking with Jesus. They spoke about his departure, which he was about to bring to fulfillment at Jerusalem. ³²Peter and his companions were very sleepy, but when they became fully awake, they saw his glory and the two men standing with him. ³³As the men were leaving Jesus, Peter said to him, "Master, it is good for us to be here. Let us put up three shelters—one for you, one for Moses and one for Elijah." (He did not know what he was saying.)

³⁴While he was speaking, a cloud appeared and enveloped them, and they were afraid as they entered the cloud. ³⁵A voice came from the cloud, saying, "This is my Son, whom I have chosen; listen to him." ³⁶When the voice had spoken, they found that Jesus was alone. The disciples kept this to themselves, and told no one at that time what they had seen.

If you could spend an afternoon with any three people—living or dead—who would they be?

I imagine that if this same question was asked of Peter—one of Jesus' disciples—he might have answered, "Jesus, the prophet Elijah, and Moses." And if my hunch is correct, Peter would have been elated by what he witnessed on that mountaintop, in the scripture story we read this morning, a passage commonly known as the Transfiguration. Jesus has taken his disciples Peter, James and John to a mountaintop to pray. When they arrive, Jesus begins to pray and Peter, James, and John, sleepy after their hike to the mountaintop, begin to snooze.

Now this is why I love the disciples—they are so, well, like me—and for those of you who are a bit snoozey here this morning—like you. They aren't perfect, they aren't amazing, they don't "get it." They, too, should have been praying up there on the mountaintop but instead, they nap. Indeed, they sleep through most of Jesus' exchange with Moses and Elijah—but when they become "fully awake" and Peter realizes what is happening, old Pete jumps on this amazing opportunity to be with Moses, Elijah, and Jesus—the three powerhouses of his Jewish faith—all there together on the top of a hill—an event that was made even more amazing by the fact that Moses and Elijah had been dead for centuries—Peter jumps on the opportunity declaring, "Master, it is good for us to be here. Let us put up three shelters—one for you, one for Moses and one for Elijah."

Now there are scholars who fault Peter for this response, saying that he simply doesn't "get it," that his response reveals his ignorance of what is happening—they claim that Peter misunderstood the significance of what was a cosmic event in which Jesus' identity as God's "only begotten son" was confirmed and instead seemed to think of it as some kind of camping trip. But I think that's a harsh analysis of the situation. I think Peter responds to the amazing situation much like any other human being would respond to such an incredible event—he is transfixed, transfixed by the love around him. And like most anyone would do when they are transfixed by love, he wants the moment to continue—he doesn't want it to end. And so he proposes what seems to me like a fairly reasonable plan—"Master, it is good for us to be here. Let us put up three shelters—one for you, one for Moses and one for Elijah." He wants to keep the moment alive, he wants to stay in that moment of transfiguration.

Can you recall a time when you were transfixed by love? A time when you, like Peter, were part of something that was so important—so amazing—that you too wanted to freeze the moment in time—that you wanted to just pitch a tent and stay in the moment forever?

On this Valentine's Day, I can't help but think of my Valentine, Corey, and the time when I was most transfixed by my love for him. It was our wedding day and I had just walked into the sanctuary and I saw him standing at the end of the aisle—I could see the tears in his eyes, the smile on his face, his shaking hands—I was bathed in a bright flash of his love and I could have stayed in that moment forever.

But of course, a moment always just lasts a moment and the pianist continued to play, and the people stood up and my parents began walking me down the aisle and that moment of being transfixed by his love, of being frozen in place while time stood still—came to an end—as all such moments must—and we began our life as a married couple just minutes later. And though the initial excitement and intensity of that moment in the church subsided, there continued, and continue, to be moments in which I am transfixed by his love.

But being transfixed isn't really what being in love is all about, is it? Sure, it feels great to be giddy with excitement and to have the enthusiasm and energy of a newlywed, but that isn't what a marriage is built on—indeed, it's not what sustains any kind of loving relationship. And this is why Jesus didn't pitch some tents and hang out with his buddies up there on the mountaintop. Jesus' ministry wasn't about a moment of being transfixed by love—Jesus' ministry was about transforming lives—and you can't transform lives standing on a mountaintop with Moses and Elijah and you can't transform lives frozen in place in the back of a sanctuary wearing a pretty dress and holding a bunch of flowers. Moments of being transfixed, inspired, and caught breathless by love are important—but they are only a means to an end, not an end in and of themselves.

A few years after that moment at the back of the sanctuary where I was wearing a pretty dress and holding a bunch of flowers, a time when I was pregnant with Nathan and we had recently moved to this area, I, as I've told you before, was hospitalized in Centre One, Munson Hospital's name for their psychiatric ward, where I underwent treatment for severe depression and anxiety. And it was during those days, when I was feeling anything but the giddy excitement of being transfixed by love, that I began to be transformed by love—God's love and particularly God's love as I experienced it through Corey. All throughout those hellish days and nights, Corey did everything he could to help. But it wasn't so much what he did—but rather what he didn't do—that was transformational for me. He didn't judge me, he didn't tell me to snap out of it, he didn't make me feel guilty for what I could have been doing to our unborn baby, he didn't neglect me, he didn't find fault in me, he didn't ask me how I could 'do this to him', he didn't force me to try to be something I wasn't—he simply loved me and he told me he loved me and he cried with me and he held my hand and he assured me that he would stay with me no matter what and he told me what I couldn't tell myself, that though this journey would be hard, I could and would indeed journey through that valley of the shadow of death and arrive at a place of new life, that I would return to green pastures to rest beside still waters. And at the time, even though my brain was sick and I was weak, I was cognizant enough realize “Oh, wow, it really is real, this guy is the real thing.” It wasn't a moment of heart-stopping passion, but a moment of true transformation.

And I can't help but think that this is what the Transfiguration story is about. It's not so much about dead people coming back to life and Jesus' clothes turning as white as lightning. Rather, the Transfiguration was the moment in which the disciples finally got it—they saw it and they heard it when God said “This is my Son, whom I have chosen; listen to him” and they must have been thinking “Oh, wow, it really is real, this guy is the real thing.” And if that is the case, they must also have known that the real work was just beginning—that the Transfiguration was the start of their transformation into being true followers of Christ. And to be followers of Christ, they couldn't pitch their tents on a mountaintop to enjoy the company and the view. No, being a follower of Christ means yes, a moment, or even moments, of being transfixed by love—moments in which you feel as if you're truly in another world—but these moments are usually few and far between. More often than not, being a follower of Christ means being transformed, slowly and surely, over time, into a disciple. And that transformation happens not on a mountaintop, but when we follow Jesus—when we follow Jesus down the mountain and into the villages and the cities, the orchards and the vineyards, homes and work places, churches and schools, psych wards and hospice centers, prisons and city streets—these are the places where love transforms—love transforms the people and the people transform each other and eventually, love transforms the world. Thanks be to God.