

Epiphany Transfiguration Year B 2012

I'll begin with a story that General Douglas MacArthur recounted as a particularly difficult moment while he was a cadet at West Point. He wrote, "The first section was studying the time-space relationship later formulated by Einstein as his Theory of Relativity. The text was complex and, being unable to comprehend it, I committed the pages to memory. When I was called upon to recite, I solemnly reeled off almost word for word what the book said. Our instructor, Colonel Fieberger, looked at me somewhat quizzically and asked, 'Do you understand this theory?' It was a bad moment for me, but I did not hesitate in replying, 'No, sir.' You could have heard a pin drop. I braced myself and waited." And then the slow words of the professor: "Neither do I, Mr. MacArthur. Section dismissed."

It is a common perception of those who read the Gospels that Jesus' contemporaries were crystal clear about who he was and what he was up to. The assumption is something like: he came upon the scene armed with a resume, business cards, and letterhead. He called 12 talented, spiritually sensitive men, who had been anxiously awaiting his arrival, and they immediately got on with the business plan that he had developed in the eons that preceded his birth in Bethlehem. The business that he planned for himself and his disciples was to go around teaching people how to be nice to one another and love everybody. His enemies were the Jews and the Romans, and they knew who he was too. They didn't like his plan and so they killed him.

The problem with this perception is that upon reading the Gospel texts themselves we can see that this is not true. Instead, most of Jesus' contemporaries had no idea who he was or what he was up to and the disciples were no exception to the

rule. Instead, they were very much like cadet MacArthur, presented with information they could not fully comprehend.

This morning marks the last Sunday in the season of Epiphany. It is the Sunday in which we remember the Transfiguration of Jesus. Transfiguration in the New Testament is a Greek word meaning metamorphosis which means to change, to transform, ...literally to change form. Like a butterfly changing its shape as it moves from being folded and confined within its cocoon into something that is expanded with wings and released into the air to fly on the currents of the wind. Transfiguration is metamorphosis. Transfiguration is Jesus' metamorphosis as his appearance changes right in front of his disciples. Peter, James, and John were witness to Jesus' changing form as his face began to shine like the sun and his clothes to become dazzling white.

Ian Curran in *The Christian Century* writes about how Transfiguration as we view it is both an event in the life of Christ but also a process in the life of the world. It is significant that the transfiguration takes place on a mountain because the mountain is a sacred place in ancient Jewish cosmology. It is where heaven and earth meet. It is where God and humanity meet. The heavenly light that radiates from the body of Jesus reveals the presence of this meeting.

What we believe is that in Jesus Christ all of creation is united and being transfigured. In the letter to the Romans it talks about how we are children, and heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ. It talks about how the whole of creation is undergoing this process of metamorphosis and transfiguration. Here is a bit from chapter 8 in Romans. "I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us. For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God;... We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labour pains until

now; and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies.”

What this letter to the Romans indicates is that there is this mysterious thing happening to every person and to all of creation and that God is indeed behind it. And as the saying goes timing is everything. It seems that everything about Jesus’ life and ministry has God’s sense and direction of timing. Jesus frequently gives instructions to his disciples about the coming of events telling them that the time has not yet come or in the case of this morning’s Gospel Jesus says, “Tell no one about the vision until after the Son of Man has been raised from the dead.” The secrecy is I suspect all about God’s timing.

God’s timing is a bit like trying to comprehend a theory beyond our comprehension. God’s timing is not understood in predictable ways. God’s ways are mysterious. We don’t know how the world and the universe are being transformed but we are called to wait with hope and patience. We don’t know when peace will come, we don’t know when the economy will recover, we don’t know when we will lose a loved one, or when we eventually will die ourselves. What it comes down to is that we don’t know much of anything. There’s a lot about life for which we have no answers and no way of knowing. So we do what we can and leave to God the gaps for which we have no answers.

Today we stand on the mountain of Jesus’ transfiguration. We have the Gospel’s witness of the unity of heaven and earth a brilliance beyond our understanding. And perhaps like General MacArthur we have been asked to engage in a complex text which requires our participation even when we cannot fully comprehend. Amen.

Excerpts from Synthesis