

GETTING THIN

Good morning. Today is the day that we celebrate the Transfiguration, the end of Epiphany, a season which began with the visit of the Magi. As the three disciples look upwards to see Jesus bathed in light on the mountaintop, one is reminded of the three wise men who looked upwards to follow a star to the Christ child in Bethlehem.

On this evening, as Jesus was praying, he caught fire from within. His face glowed, and his clothes became dazzling white. Then, in the circle of the light, Moses and Elijah appeared. Elijah, who according to Scripture, would reappear just before the coming of the Messiah, and Moses, the lawgiver, who led the Hebrews to freedom.

Like Moses before him, Jesus was about to set God's people free, only it was not bondage to Pharaoh; it was bondage to their fear, their fear of sin and death, a far greater enslavement than anything the Egyptians could have managed.

Similarly, the voice of God from the cloud echoes the voice that came from heaven when Jesus was baptized at the beginning of his ministry. But whereas God previously said to Jesus, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased," now God is saying to the disciples, "This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!"

God's encouragement was passing from the solitary savior to his disciples and to us. Epiphany begins with the light descending on Jesus at his birth and ends with it exploding through him. It begins with the three wise men honoring him in a stable; it ends with three disciples being told to honor him on a mountain. So the Transfiguration is a big deal, make no mistake about it.

Like many mountaintops, this place was a "thin place," where the boundary between heaven and earth - the boundary between God and man - is especially thin. One feels a connection with some bigger force, some extra-rational, divine force, and it brings a sense of awe, contentment, and freedom. Throughout Scotland and Ireland, one can go on pilgrimages to "thin places," historically known as a place of connection to the divine, but one does not need to go to a "thin *place*" to experience a divine connection.

Thin *times* are times when we feel a sudden and mysterious power and connection with something much bigger than we. Common ones include the birth of a child (or grandchild), the return of a loved one, reconciliation with an enemy or spiritual awakening. Our senses are charged, electrified, illuminated with the presence of that power. I call these "magical moments," and I would not be here today if it were not for these magical moments of "thin times."

I wonder if you have ever felt God's presence, up close and personal. In our denomination, people are generally reticent to discuss such episodes, for we are unable to explain them rationally and thus feel awkward. But I have met many smart folks who privately shared a personal encounter with God that transformed their lives. And then, several years ago, I came across a book by Barbara Bradley Haggerty, *Fingerprints of God* - citing studies showing that nearly half of all Americans have had a

life-changing "religious experience." [Repeat] This is our Lenten theme - exploring thin places, honoring thin times, and claiming the presence of the Holy in our lives.

I had one over 15 years ago that dramatically changed my understanding of God and of myself. I had gone to an open house at an interfaith center, where they were giving sample workshops on various topics. I arrived late, missing the sessions for which I had signed up, and found that there were only two possibilities, one on leading spiritual direction groups and the other on using icons to aid in meditation and spiritual contemplation.

I wasn't qualified for the first, and I felt uncomfortable with the second. I've enjoyed services at Russian and Greek Orthodox churches, and I recognize icons as art forms, but not as objects of worship or adoration. For me, they represented the worst kind of belief: graven images, sacrilege, heresy, not the true God... I'm a Protestant, thank you very much, and proud of that. But I've got too much Scottish blood to travel all this distance just to drive away without sampling any of the center's programs. So I went in.

The woman leading the workshop - a Protestant minister - explained that icons were not objects of adoration, but rather veneration. Only people who spend long periods in spiritual disciplines are trained as iconographers, and creating an icon is accompanied by fasting and prayer. Further, icons are not pictures of God, but reflections of God, much as the moon is a reflection of the sun's glory. I found the explanation helpful, but I was still skeptical about their value in spiritual enlightenment.

We then did some deep breathing and relaxation, before the leader displayed the first icon, from the sixth century. Christ had a beautiful, almost handsome, face that seemed open and kindly disposed. As with most icons, the eyes were powerful and magnetic - like Mona Lisa, they seemed to track and look directly at (or, in Jesus' case, through) you. He had medium brown hair, an exquisitely sharp and chiseled nose, and thin lips. The condition of the icon was quite good, considering its age.

It was quite nice, and I wouldn't have minded having a copy somewhere in the house. I could enjoy a sense of peace and calmness while looking at it. But when the leader asked us to close our eyes, and feel Jesus' presence, I felt nothing special. I imagined the comfort of having a loving older brother nearby - but it seemed contrived. I had to work at it. I had to will it to happen.

I did not care for the second icon, which was from the 13th century. Christ still had the magnetic, all-seeing eyes, but there was a roughness about his face unlike that of the first one. This was heightened by time-damage, so that there almost seemed to be a huge scar piercing through his face. This guy could also see into my soul, but not gently like the first. This big brother was older and more judgmental, giving me the impression of being macho and rigid. Meditating based on this icon left me cold - or even scared.

When the leader moved to the third icon, it was breathtaking. The icon was of Mary, with Jesus in her arms. Jesus, probably seven or eight months old, is looking at Mary but also past her, and he combines an infant's innocence with an aspect of joyful anticipation. It is as though he is looking at his mother with love and satisfaction, but also looking beyond her to something else. And, of course, I surmised that the something else is God, and that Jesus can see God and also see into a future filled with love. It isn't clear whether Jesus can see his role in the future, but he seems to be quite content in Mary's loving arms, feeling her warmth and the gentle rhythm of her heartbeat. You get the impression that he knows that everything was going to work out just fine.

But I had a totally different reaction. I gasped out loud, felt my chest imploding, and wiped the sudden beads of cold sweat that broke out along my forehead. Hot tears of searing pain escaped from my eyes as I willed myself not to bolt from the room. The only reason I didn't leave is that the room was dark and I was in a corner furthest from the door.

Many of you know that I lost a child at three months, and had health issues with the others. And those of you who are parents know that parenting is the most wonderful - but also the most guilt-ridden - activity one will ever know. Whatever you do, you wonder whether you should have done something else instead. And when things go wrong with your children, you always blame yourself.

And so my happiness for Jesus came nowhere close to mitigating my abject sorrow for Mary. When the leader asked us, once again, to close our eyes, and listen to God's message to us, all I felt was sadness and longing. As Mary looks lovingly at Jesus, she can see his future and his death. She loves him so powerfully and it hurts so much. She suffers for him, for herself, and for the world. To the extent that God might be part of the image, then God is looking lovingly over Mary's shoulder to Christ. God is, at best, oblivious to Mary. Mary alone grieves. And the mother in me still gets teary and my hands still tremble and I still get choked up studying the look on her face. And so, on that day when I first saw this icon, I cried for Mary and I cried for Jesus and I cried for my dead daughter and I cried for myself.

As I tried to think about God's message to me through this icon, I identified so much with Mary that I couldn't feel anything else. I could hold my daughter in my arms as Mary held Christ and know that all I could give was my love. And while that was inadequate to mitigate the suffering, it was all I had, and, in the end, I prayed that it was good enough. Mary seems to be accepting of the agony, while I still wrestle with it, but it didn't hurt her any the less.

And then I blinked. And suddenly, through my tears, the image was transformed - or should I say transfigured - such that Mary became God and I became the Christ child. God can hold me close and love me, and yet be unable to protect me from the pain of the world. But there is never any question about God's love for me or the suffering that God feels on my account. It is an all-consuming love, just as I felt for my daughter, however helpless and painful my love may have been.

And so with the sadness came a strange and wonderful calm. God held me in her arms, saw all of my known and unknown sins, and loved me tenderly and completely nonetheless. This was my personal "Transfiguration Sunday," for my image of God was forever changed, and my fear and guilt were consumed in the overpowering brilliance of God's love. It was a thin place - and a magical moment - where I felt especially close to God and also unburdened by past failures.

As a loved child, I was vulnerable. I was exposed, but I was accepted. As a loving parent, I became merged with God and Jesus and Mary into a persona and a force that was tantalizingly inexplicable - but fabulous and powerful.

And it was sufficient, for it brought peace, and it brought freedom. And that, my friends, is what Transfiguration Sunday is all about. It was a miracle moment that has lasted for a lifetime.