

SEEING ONE ANOTHER AS WE REALLY ARE

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Psalm 50:1-6; Mark 9:2-9

“And [Jesus] was transfigured before them, and his clothes became dazzling white, such as no one on earth could bleach them.”

Mark 9:2b

A few years ago I was in Louisville, Kentucky for some denominational meetings, and I saw, just a short walk from my hotel, one of the more unusual historical markers you’ll ever see. It was right there on a street corner, at a busy downtown intersection.

You’ve seen the sort of marker I’m talking about: a cast-metal sign, slightly old-fashioned, a little scrollwork at the top. The raised letters describe what went on at that particular place that’s of historical significance.

This one was not the location of some battle. Nor was it where President Lincoln gave a campaign speech. Nor was it the home of some famous novelist. No, this historical marker is something far more unusual.

The big capital letters at the top say: “A REVELATION.” This historical marker commemorates a spiritual vision.

The visionary was Thomas Merton: a Trappist monk and one of the best-selling spiritual writers of the twentieth century.

When Merton entered the order he was a graduate student in English at

Columbia University. He surprised everyone he knew by announcing he'd received a call from God to become a monk. Off he went to the Gethsemani Monastery of the Trappist order, just outside Louisville. It would be his home for the rest of his life.

Merton didn't always have an easy time keeping his vows. He had a keen interest in the world outside the monastery. He struggled to reconcile his contemplative life with what he could be doing out there in society, working for causes he was passionate about: civil rights and nuclear disarmament. He wrote about these struggles in a number of bestselling books about the spiritual life.

On March 18, 1958 — standing on that very street corner, watching the crowds of shoppers and office workers surge past him on the sidewalk — Thomas Merton had a vision from God. Here's how he describes it in his book,

Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander:

In Louisville, at the corner of Fourth and Walnut, in the center of the shopping district, I was suddenly overwhelmed with the realization that I loved all those people, that they were mine and I theirs, that we could not be alien to one another even though we were total strangers. It was like waking from a dream of separateness..... I have the immense joy of being [human], a member of a race in which God became incarnate. As if the sorrows and stupidities of the human condition could overwhelm me, now I realize what we all are. And if only everybody could realize this! But it cannot be explained. There is no way of telling people that they are all walking around shining like the sun.

[Thomas Merton, *Spiritual Master: The Essential Writings* (Paulist, 1992), pp. 144-145.]

Think of that: you and I, as we run our errands, sit at our computers, open a can of soup in the kitchen, are shining brightly like the sun. *And we don't even know it!* If the witness of the scriptures is at all true, then the part of us that's most truly real is, by the blessing of God, holy. We are clay from the riverbank scooped up by the hands of the creator, molded into God's own image, and infused with the breath of divine life. Because of that, we do shine like the sun.

Let's leave our friend the Trappist monk, now, and see what a scientist has to say about such a wonder. A physicist by the name of Arnold Benz looks deep within the very molecules of which we're made:

The carbon and oxygen in our bodies stem from the helium combustion zone of an old star. Two silicon nuclei, merged in the early phase of a supernova explosion, became the iron in our blood's hemoglobin. The calcium in our teeth formed out of a supernova out of oxygen and silicon. The fluoride with which we brush our teeth was produced in a rare neutrino interaction with neon. The iodine in our thyroid glands arose through neutron capture at the onset of a supernova. We are connected with the development of stars and are ourselves part of the cosmic history.

[Arnold Benz, *The Future of The Universe: Chance, Chaos, God?* (Continuum, 2002), pp. 32-33.]

Maybe that's what poet and songwriter Joni Mitchell was thinking as she wrote these lines. The Baby Boomers among us know them well. They're from the song, *Woodstock*, made famous by Crosby, Stills, Nash and Young:

Well I came across a child of God, he was walking along the road

**And I asked him, tell where are you going, this he told me:
Well, I'm going down to Yasgur's farm, going to join in a rock and roll band.
Got to get back to the land, set my soul free.
We are stardust, we are golden, we are billion year old carbon,
And we got to get ourselves back to the garden.**

On the Mount of Transfiguration, a short way off from his dozing disciples, Jesus of Nazareth — child of God— reached deep into himself, down through skin and muscle and bone, until he came to the very core of his physical being. Down he reached, from there, into that dark realm where electrons orbit nuclei — circling faster than the mind can comprehend. Deep within even those minute molecules, each one a solar system unto itself, there's a luminescent playground of subatomic particles. These blink into life for a millionth of a second — quicker than the quickest of shooting stars — before winking out again. Yet, each bright explosion is succeeded by another, and another, until that shadowy realm is illumined by dancing energy, the holy fire at the center of all things.

Reaching deep into himself, not with the fingers of his hand but with the power of his will, Jesus grasped that very light and pulled it outward — until the fire within became the fire without.

Have you ever lain upon a beach, warm light falling full upon your face, eyes closed tight against the blinding light of that star we call the sun? Sure you

have. You can see the inside of your eyelids. They seem to glow red. Maybe this is the sensation Peter, James and John experience as the cool darkness of night suddenly vanishes, pushed back by the man-shaped star standing a short distance away.

They shield their eyes with their forearms. They have to look away, or be blinded. But they've seen just enough to know it is their Master, as they have never seen him before.

Beside Jesus are standing two other figures — star-men like himself. Somehow the disciples know them to be Moses and Elijah — the greatest of the prophets. Great because, in their time, had talked directly with God.

Peter feels the urge to fill the luminous silence with speech, but the words that come out of his mouth are foolish beyond all belief: “Rabbi, it is good for us to be here; let me make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses and one for Elijah.”

None of the three pay the least attention to his words, because, even then, a bright cloud — the holy wonder the Hebrew scriptures call the *shekinah* — is descending from heaven, surrounding these three prophets of God. From the cloud emerges a voice, beautiful beyond all beauty and infinitely old: “This is my Son, the beloved: listen to him!”

And with that, the light winks out, restoring the mountaintop to its natural darkness. A few minutes pass before their eyes are fully adjust to the blackness. In time, they see again the moon and the stars winking down at them. Silhouetted by their celestial light, they see their Lord walking towards them, a mere man as he has always been — yet, now, in their estimation, more than a man.

The letter of Second Peter recalls the glory and the wonder of their experience in these verses:

We had been eyewitnesses of his majesty. For he received honor and glory from God the Father when that voice was conveyed to him by the Majestic Glory, saying, “This is my Son, my Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.” We ourselves heard this voice come from heaven, while we were with him on the holy mountain.

[2 Peter 1:16–18]

Maybe the only way to do justice to such a mystical experience is by way of poetry. The Scottish poet, Edwin Muir, published this poem, “The Transfiguration,” in 1949. It’s quite extraordinary. The poem is written from the perspective of the three disciples: as, in the days that follow after, they ponder this mystery they’ve seen. I invite you as I read it to close your eyes, attend to these lines of verse, and let the poet’s art sing to you of mystical experience that cannot be captured in words (only hinted at):

So from the ground we felt that virtue branch

Through all our veins till we were whole, our wrists
As fresh and pure as water from a well,
Our hands made new to handle holy things,
The source of all our seeing rinsed and cleansed
Till earth and light and water entering there
Gave back to us the clear unfallen world.
We would have thrown our clothes away for lightness,
But that even they, though sour and travel stained,
Seemed, like our flesh, made of immortal substance,
And the soiled flax and wool lay light upon us
Like friendly wonders, flower and flock entwined
As in a morning field. Was it a vision?
Or did we see that day the unseeable
One glory of the everlasting world
Perpetually at work, though never seen
Since Eden locked the gate that's everywhere
And nowhere? Was the change in us alone,
And the enormous earth still left forlorn,
An exile or a prisoner? Yet the world
We saw that day made this unreal, for all
Was in its place. The painted animals
Assembled there in gentle congregations,
Or sought apart their leafy oratories,
Or walked in peace, the wild and tame together,
As if, also for them, the day had come.
The shepherds' hovels shone, for underneath
The soot we saw the stone clean at the heart
As on the starting-day. The refuse heaps
Were grained with that fine dust that made the world;
For he had said, 'To the pure all things are pure.'
And when we went into the town, he with us,
The lurkers under doorways, murderers,
With rags tied round their feet for silence, came
Out of themselves to us and were with us,
And those who hide within the labyrinth
Of their own loneliness and greatness came,
And those entangled in their own devices,

**The silent and the garrulous liars, all
Stepped out of their dungeons and were free.
Reality or vision, this we have seen.
If it had lasted but another moment
It might have held for ever! But the world
Rolled back into its place, and we are here,
And all that radiant kingdom lies forlorn,
As if it had never stirred; no human voice
Is heard among its meadows, but it speaks
To itself alone, alone it flowers and shines
And blossoms for itself while time runs on.**

**But he will come again, it's said, though not
Unwanted and unsummoned; for all things,
Beasts of the field, and woods, and rocks, and seas,
And all mankind from end to end of the earth
Will call him with one voice. In our own time,
Some say, or at a time when time is ripe.
Then he will come, Christ the uncrucified,
Christ the discrucified, his death undone,
His agony unmade, his cross dismantled—
Glad to be so—and the tormented wood
Will cure its hurt and grow into a tree
In a green springing corner of young Eden,
And Judas damned take his long journey backward
From darkness into light and be a child
Beside his mother's knee, and the betrayal
Be quite undone and never more be done.**

Well the poet knows, it's a mystery: this transfiguration, this transformation, this metamorphosis on the mountain from flesh to spirit and back again.

Who dwells on a mountaintop, anyway? There's no living to be scratched, there, from the piles of rock at the summit. There's no spring of water, no roof to

shelter under — unless it's a rude lean-to of the sort Peter offered to build. No, mountaintops are not for dwelling. They're for visiting — and for visions.

The question is, for us, in our spiritual lives: Can we carry such visions down from the mountain, as we pick our way back down the winding trail, to the plain where people dwell?

In just a few days — on Ash Wednesday this year, when world collide — Valentine's Day: that gentle holiday of flowers and hearts and boxes of chocolates; of dinners by candlelight — and, for the younger set, stacks of those punched-out cardboard valentines, exchanged with everyone else in the class. Oh, and maybe a handful of those chalky heart-shaped sweetheart candies stamped with mildly flirtatious sayings: "CRAZY 4 YOU," "BE MINE" and "OH YOU KID."

It's easy to be in love on Valentine's Day — or, at least, to play at it. It's far harder to sustain committed love for another person, over time, through all the ups and downs and crazy detours of life.

The preacher Peter Marshall was thinking of just this sort of love — love for the long haul — as he spoke these words to a couple on their wedding day:

We are souls living in bodies. Therefore when we really fall in

love, it's not just physical attraction. If it is just that, it won't last. Ideally, it's also spiritual attraction. God has opened our eyes and let us see into someone's soul. We have fallen in love with the inner person, the person who is going to live forever. That's why God is the greatest asset to romance. [God] thought it up in the first place. Include [the Lord] in every part of your marriage, and [God] will lift it above the level of the mundane to something rare and beautiful and lasting.

[Catherine Marshall, *A Man Called Peter* (Chosen Books, 2002), p. 73.]

Truer words have never been spoken, for marriage or any other loving relationship. Part of the secret to loving another deeply and well is this very matter we've been considering today: spiritual vision. Such vision — that depends not on the eyes at all — permits us to glimpse our beloved, ever so briefly, as the spiritual being he or she truly is. It matters not that we all grow old, in time, and — if we're fortunate, with our beloved beside us. It matters not that the measured stride grows halting, the grip grows weak, the eyesight grows dim. For that spiritual being is ageless. Its blazing form is eternal, immutable.

The book of Genesis says we were created in God's image. The English word "image" is scarcely adequate, though, to translate the Hebrew. It suggests a mere external form, an outer shell. A woman who walks into a beauty salon for a "makeover" is seeking some modest changes in her external image, wrought by the lesser miracles of haircutting, makeup and manicure. Images — as we well know in these days of photoshopped pictures and CGI movies — are airy, insubstantial:

sometimes, even deceptive.

God's image is a much deeper concept than that. It's a lot more like that miraculous vision of the transfigured Lord. As it says in the First Letter of John:

Beloved, we are God's children now; what we will be has not yet been revealed. What we do know is this: when he is revealed, we will be like him, for we will see him as he is.

[1 John 3:2]

"We will be like him." It's not unlike the epiphany, the mystical vision, experienced by that celibate monk, Thomas Merton in 1958, as he stood at the corner of Fourth and Walnut. Those people around him, he perceived, were not as they seemed: "There is no way of telling people that they are all walking around shining like the sun."

It is a rare and precious thing to glimpse such glory. Yet, now and again — if we are attentive to things unseen, you and I may be so blessed as to catch but a flicker of the way things really are, in this God-dreamed universe of passionate, fiery love.

Such a vision can sustain us all our days. Such a vision comes, as God's gift in Jesus Christ, to those who give up allegiance to all other lords and follow him, as his disciples.

Let us pray:

Lord, we ask not for the spectacular vision —

**fire on a mountaintop,
bushes ablaze but not consumed,
the ones we love transfigured, before our very eyes.
No. Such a marvel is not ours to ask for,
but only yours to give.
We ask, instead, for a more modest vision:
the puzzling reflection, as in a mirror,
allowing us to glimpse in another's eyes
the dancing fire of divine life,
the reality of a kindred soul.
How are we ever to see you
if not through the love we give to others
and receive in return?
Free us to love in such a way:
boldly, extravagantly, selflessly.
Free us to see one another as we really are.
Amen.**