

“Get up! Don’t be afraid!”

Randy Hyde responds to today’s Gospel Lectionary Reading by suggesting, “The story of the transfiguration of Christ is the biblical equivalent of Friday night at your local Theater. It is a preview of what it would be for Christ in the resurrection. Jesus’ face shines like the sun, Matthew tells us, and his clothes become dazzling white. Jesus is glorified right before the very eyes of Peter, James, and John as he communes with Moses and Elijah.

Previews, unfortunately, don’t last long by their very nature. If they did, they wouldn’t be called ‘previews.’ They would be full-length movies. But then again, this is one of the Bible’s true mountaintop experiences, and as we all know, mountaintop experiences don’t last very long. Every once in a while a moment comes along that we wish we could freeze for all eternity.” Hyde concludes, “It’s the kind of experience that reaches down into the marrow of our bones and touches us with a special feeling. We wish it would last forever, but it doesn’t.” (Randy Hyde, *The Preview*)

Studying the Biblical reports of the Transfiguration and other occasions, when God’s presence was experienced through an agent or representative of God’s purposes, I have found a common process. The term I use to refer to those remarkable events is **“Theophany”**. Many of us are aware of the stories about Moses meeting God on Mount Sinai, of Jacob’s ladder to heaven, and of the numerous angel visitations. Those experiences are examples of what I define as theophanies.

You and I may be tempted to believe theophanies, if they ever took place, belong to Biblical times and are no longer part of our everyday lives. Yet, I share with each Confirmation Class, how each of us have many opportunities to experience the presence of God. **Unfortunately, we frequently fail to recognize God’s presence in those encounters.**

I also share with Confirmation Classes how we tend to be more open to recognizing God is breaking into our lives during moments of great joy or sadness and even when we suffer or triumph. In a few months, each of our Confirmands will present their Personal Statements of Belief. Included in those statements will be their descriptions of their experiences of God’s Presence.

As we examine the Transfiguration theophany, **I urge each of us to focus on our own experiences of the Presence of God and how we might describe one of our personal encounters with a loved one, family member, neighbor, coworker, acquaintance, and even with one’s enemies.**

The setting for a theophany often includes a person or a group with a significant need and/or stress. The verses prior to today’s Scripture report Jesus promised some of his disciples would witness him come as King in the glory of God. He knew they needed that promise and its fulfillment because they would soon experience great turmoil. The theophany process then moves to a moment of great wonder – something extraordinary! The Transfiguration of Jesus helped fulfill the disciples’ need, so they could hold together following his death. Consider the times when you had great need and/or stress – when you needed God’s help or guidance. Matthew reveals such a scene in the opening words of today’s Reading, **“As they looked on, a change came over Jesus: his face was shining like the sun, and his clothes were dazzling white. Then the three disciples saw Moses and Elijah talking with Jesus.”** I recognize very few of our personal experiences of the Presence of God include someone’s appearance changing in such a dramatic fashion! However, some of our extraordinary experiences do include startling sights, sounds, and even smells. **Have you ever found yourself in such an encounter?**

Brett Younger helps us regain a sense of such wonder by reminding us, “When middle C is struck on the piano the piston of bones in your inner ear vibrates exactly 256 times a second. Each day you think about 50,000 different thoughts. When you flex your hand you are using seventy different muscles. On the surface of your body there are as many bacteria as there are people on the surface of the earth.” With a humorous aside, Younger confesses, “(I should have skipped that one.)” Returning to his topic, he says, “The mystery of your birth, the mystery of the love you feel, the mystery of the deepest part of you are all most improbable. You are an incredible contingency.”

Younger concludes by quoting Sam Keen, who said, “I suspect that we are all recipients of cosmic love notes. Messages, omens, voices, revelations, and appeals are all part of each day’s events. If only we know how to listen, to read the signs.” Younger sums up, “Our everyday life isn’t every day. The surface of what we see and hear isn’t all there is. When you laugh, when you cry, when you feel something happening inside, open yourself to the possibilities. The potential of the life that we have been given is breathtaking. Open your eyes. Listen carefully. Pay attention.” (Brett Younger, *Glimpses of Glory*)

Of the three disciples, who were present, Peter was the one who, instead of listening carefully and paying attention, decided to speak up – to get Jesus’ attention! Matthew states, **“So Peter spoke up and said to Jesus, ‘Lord, how good it is that we are here! If you wish, I will make three tents here, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.’”** From Peter’s comments, we learn he knew the two persons, who were talking with his Transfigured Lord were two of the greats from Old Testament times – Moses and Elijah! What could have led Peter to interrupt Jesus’ conversation with them?

The staff of Sermons.com uses the following story to lead into a discussion of Peter’s reason for interrupting Jesus’ conversation. The story goes, “A brilliant magician was performing on an ocean liner. But every time he did a trick, the

Captain's parrot would yell, 'It's a trick. He's a phony. That's not magic.' Then one evening during a storm, the ship sank while the magician was performing. The parrot and the magician ended up in the same lifeboat. For several days they just glared at each other, neither saying a word to the other. Finally the parrot said, 'OK, I give up. What did you do with the ship?'"

The Sermons.com staff sums up the story, "The parrot couldn't explain that last trick! It was too much to comprehend, even for a smart parrot. Peter said to Jesus, '*Rabbi, it is good for us to be here. Let us put up three shelters – one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.*'" The staff concludes, "Scholars over the years have tried to explain what in the world Peter meant by this suggestion. But, ... trying to find meaning to these words is pointless. It's simply the way Matthew explains: Peter was frightened and he just said the first thing that came to into his head. He simply could not comprehend what was happening." ("A Mountain of Meaning", by sermons.com staff)

However, it is common during theophany encounters for someone to express a temporary rejection of God's Good News. Although Peter had earlier declared Jesus is the Messiah, what he witnessed during Jesus' Transfiguration was just too awesome – too scary for him to be in a receptive mood – for after all, he was the impetuous and slow to understand Peter. **How often do you or I have an initial negative response to God breaking into our lives? Are we open to God's presence even now?**

Theophanies frequently move forward to include God's Good News. Have you received Good News from God? Matthew's description continues, "*While he was talking, a shining cloud came over them, and a voice from the cloud said, 'This is My Own Dear Son, with whom I am pleased — listen to him!'*" Wow! Clearly, it is not everyday when you or I receive Good News from God by way of a voice speaking from a mysterious cloud! Instead, we usually get much more subtle communications of God's Good News.

An example of the more subtle message comes from "Presbyterian pastor and writer Frederick Buechner" who "recalls one low time in his life when God broke through in an unusual way. 'I remember sitting parked by the roadside once,' Buechner writes, 'terribly depressed and afraid about my daughter's illness and what was going on in our family.' As he was sitting there thinking about his daughter's illness, he noticed a car that seemed to come from nowhere. His message from God, the word he most needed to see at that moment, was found on the license plate. The license plate 'bore on it the one word out of all the words in the dictionary that I needed most to see exactly then,' Buechner wrote. '**The word was TRUST.**'

Sitting in his car alongside the highway, God's message was revealed on the license plate of a passing car. It's certainly difficult to describe such an experience. 'Was the experience something to laugh off as the kind of joke life plays on us every once in a while?' Or was it the word of God? 'I am willing to believe that maybe it was something of both,' Buechner wrote, 'but for me it was an epiphany.' The owner of the car turned out to be a trust officer at a local bank. After reading of the incident somewhere, the trust officer paid a personal visit to Buechner one afternoon. He presented Buechner with the license plate which bore the word which he so desperately needed to see that day, **TRUST**. Buechner placed that license plate on a bookshelf where it serves to remind him of his trust in God. 'It is rusty around the edges and a little battered,' he writes, 'and it is also as holy a relic as I have ever seen.'" (King Duncan, Collected Sermons, www.Sermons.com)

Frequently, when God's Good News is received another type of negative response is exhibited by us human beings. This response is also shown in Matthew's description of the Transfiguration of Jesus, "*When the disciples heard the voice, they were so terrified that they threw themselves face downward on the ground.*" Fear is a common response to the realization of God's Presence and Purpose! That is the negative version of the response. However, fear, such as "the Fear of the Lord" is not caused by expecting pain, punishment, or death but, as a result, of awe – wonder – reverence for God and the Divine Parent's Will. **The Almighty does not want us to fear getting zapped – to suffer because of guilt – but, instead, to have reverence for the overwhelming love and goodness of God!**

Jesus demonstrated this during his Transfiguration theophany, as Matthew reports, "*Jesus came to them and touched them. 'Get up,' he said. 'Don't be afraid!'*" If you are afraid of being punished or afraid to trust God, then Jesus gives you words of comfort – "*Fear not!*" or as our Call To Worship quotes from the Book of Revelation, "*Don't be afraid! I am the first and the last. I am the living one! I was dead, but now I am alive forever and ever. I have authority over death and the world of the dead.*"

So, how do you and I respond? **First, don't hide** – don't cower thinking God's judgment will zap you. **Second, don't doubt God's faithfulness!** Listen to Jesus for as he told the three disciples, he tells you and me, "*Get up! Don't be afraid!*" **Nurture your openness to God and Jesus through a deeper and frequent prayer and Worship life. Be open to God's Presence, Purpose, and Comfort, and then, let's "Get up!" and boldly live the New Life in Jesus Christ! Live without fear! Amen.**