

**TRANSFIGURED: A SERMON IN FOUR ACTS; MARK 9:2-9;
FEBRUARY 22, 2009; THOMAS H. YORTY, WESTMINSTER**

Act I

Try taking it by surprise, and it turns
To a dream; try matching it by force,
And punishment is the reward.
Often, when you've barely given it
A thought, it just happens...ⁱ

Those lines by the poet Holderlin are a fair description of our quest to grasp, contain, capture God's glory; to possess divine wisdom and meaning; to find holy happiness in life. It is what attracted the disciples, then the crowds to Jesus – like moths to the light.

And like moths, once in the light, according to Mark today, they did not know what to say or do. Peter offers an irrelevant, impulsive suggestion. You get the sense the three of them are just flittering, half-fascinated, half-terrified on the margins of Jesus' burning glory.

So sometimes we avoid the light, the glory – perhaps intuiting its intensity, laser-like and dangerous to our compromised, shadow-shrouded lives. Indeed, for most of us, much would have to burn away, much would have to change were we to directly encounter God's glory.

And yet, says Holderlin again, “many timid eyes await a glimpse of the light.” We want it but we don't want it, such is the ambivalence of human existence, “reluctant,” he says, “to flower in the glare.”ⁱⁱ

Act II

I was in New York last week and in addition to the business of Auburn Seminary I was fortunate to take in some photographic exhibits and a show called “Artist's Choice” in which a local artist curates a show from the museum's permanent collection.

What was amazing to me was how bowled over I was by the simple, everyday pictures and artifacts on display. The first thing to stop me in my tracks was a snow shovel hanging by invisible filament, turning slowly in the currents of the room against the white backdrop of the wall.

This was a mint condition, 1915, galvanized steel with reinforced blade, wood handle shovel. I can't tell you how many times I have had one of our four snow shovels in my hands this winter and never looked at them.

This 1915 steel and wood model was beautiful. Primitive by today's standards of plastic and curvature but I considered its simple, functional design with vertical indentations on the blade to shed wet snow and conical handle for comfort and marveled at the ingenuity and will to survive of the human species.

It was as if my eyes were opened. Sometimes, much of the time, we look at things and don't see them. But last Wednesday at the Museum of Modern Art I saw a snow shovel transfigured from the clutter of my garage to the marvelous invention it is.

From then on the rest of the day was a revelation. A pair of scissors—with its ingenious accommodation for the human thumb; a pencil—that simple invention that sustained public education for centuries; a photograph of a drop of milk captured nano-seconds after it hit a bright red countertop and created something in the splash that looked more like a king's crown than cow's milk.

Each artifact conveying the wonder and beauty and precious gift of this temporal world. The photographic exhibits were equally riveting. A series of pictures of a poor, unkempt woman sitting on a plastic chair in a deserted parking lot in New Orleans eating fried chicken out of a Styrofoam box then smoking a cigarette; or

the weather beaten clapboard side of a sharecropper's shack and the sweet faces of young children sitting on a single step at the front door – like a bouquet of fresh flowers; or a man cutting grass against the backdrop of a superhighway; or a young girl shooting basketball with her father on their street in a poor neighborhood in Houston.

“Not in Utopoia...or some secreted island.
Heaven knows where!” said Wordsworth, Holderlin's contemporary
“But in this very world, which is the world
Of all of us, the place where, in the end,
We find our happiness or not at all!”ⁱⁱⁱ

Act III

As opposed to the Gospel of John which shimmers with radiance and glory, Mark's Gospel portrays Jesus laboring in the long shadow of the cross.

Everywhere he goes people follow and gather and flutter about him but no one seems to see or hear him. They are attracted to him because he has the power to heal and they want to be healed.

But their curiosity stops there. They are disinterested in and put off by the path he intends to take. How strange that he should intend to suffer and die; what kind of glory suffers and dies? But the demons and dark spirits perceive his aim and ask for his mercy.

Not only do we not see or hear much of our day to day world as it goes spinning by but we do not see or hear much of Jesus as he teaches, heals and proclaims good news then goes on to his ignominious death and glorious resurrection.

It could be, as I said, that confronting Jesus might ask more of us than we think we are willing or able to give. Just as, were we to fully engage our day to day worlds, it might be more than any of us could take: the poverty on our streets, the tenderness in our homes, the injustice in our world. I am convinced the writer of the Gospel of Mark knew this. He told us as much in his depictions of the half-hearted, self-serving disciples.

We are also in the dark regarding our world as it is and Jesus as he is because our lives are supersaturated with information and noise. Television, for example, not just at home but in every room at home, in the back seat of the taxi-cab, blaring in the waiting rooms of airports and doctors, glaring in sports bars and restaurants.

Fearful, busy, distracted disciples Peter, James and John – you and me – and then he invites us to go up a mountain with him where our eyebrows if not our carefully groomed lives are singed by the dazzling light of his presence.

As they were coming down the mountain he ordered them to tell no one what they had seen, until after the Son of Man had risen from the dead.

“What do you suppose that was about?” you can almost hear Peter asking the others. “Darned if we know,” comes the bewildered response of James and John.

“But the voice said ‘listen,’” one of them replies. “Do you suppose we haven’t been listening?” And that night each of them reconsidered what it was that attracted them to him in the first place, what their reasons were for leaving their fishing nets and collection agencies and community organizing and following him.

The experience on the mountain was summoning them to something deeper; to something still not clearly defined but which they felt in their bones was asking greater sacrifice than they had originally anticipated or thought possible.

One commentary says glory is what they were after. But now they wondered: what is glory? Was it merely more of what they already had or the perfection of what they sought to be and do? Neither of those things seemed big enough to account for what Jesus was asking of them. The life he was calling them to was not just about improving their moral or intellectual performance. It was about becoming new and different altogether.

Act IV

The benefit of being the readers of Mark’s Gospel today is that we know all of this gets clarified after Easter. From the perspective of the cross and Resurrection so much that doesn’t make sense from the Mt. of Transfiguration makes sense from Mt. Calvary.

We don’t actually become more, we become less. Instead of grasping tightly to life we learn to let it go. Much as the poet meant when he said, letting go of our anxious grip is the beginning of the path to happiness.

But today perhaps we are much like those struggling disciples this side of Easter distracted by the question of glory; of having more of the stuff of this world or being worried about losing what we have worked so hard to acquire. Not to mention the anxieties that go with living in a time of war in a world that seems to have forgotten the mission of commerce and care.

We are on the eve of Lent. This Wednesday is Ash Wednesday the beginning of a forty day journey from winter to spring, from darkness to light, from death to life.

This annual account of Jesus’ transfiguration always comes as a summons to wake up after winter slumber; to regroup, to re-evaluate, and to recommit.

Last week after the bad news of Flight 3407 and Aasiya Hassan when we heard our children sing on the steps of the chancel I thought if we were smart we’d pray and go home. What I felt was we’d received enough glory, enough consoling presence of Christ that we could endure anything more the world had to offer. That’s the promise of a transfigured life-enough of God’s glory to remake us and the world. Amen.

ⁱ Friedrich Holderlin, *Hymns and Fragments*. Translated and Introduced by Richard Sieburth. "The Migration" (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984). 19.

ⁱⁱ Holderlin, "The Migration", 15.

ⁱⁱⁱ William Wordsworth, The Prelude Book XI, II. 140-144. *Selected Poems and Prefaces* edited by Jack Spillinger (Boston: Houghton-Mifflin, 1965) 330-340.