

CHANGE CAN BE GLORIOUS

Luke 9:28-36

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Coincidences make life more interesting. I actually prefer the word, “serendipity,” which means a happy or fortunate accident.

Three years ago, about this time of the year, I received word that I had received a grant for a sabbatical, and shortly thereafter, Doug and I began planning our sabbatical trip to Europe. We settled on the places we wanted to go, how long we wanted to stay in each place, and then began making flight and hotel reservations. One of the places we wanted to go was Omaha Beach in Normandy and I was surprised that I was having trouble getting a hotel room. Why were all the hotels booked more than six months in advance? That wasn’t the case anywhere else we were going. Then I realized we had planned to go to Omaha Beach on June 6. D-Day. It was a coincidence, a serendipity. We did find the last hotel room in the area and it was a part of our trip that we will never forget. We were able to observe the D-Day commemorations, including one which took place right under our hotel room window.

Last spring, I began planning a week-long study retreat. I chose a week when I didn’t have any weddings or other commitments. I began looking for a place I could drive to, something not too expensive, a good location for the kind of work I wanted to do. I selected a retreat center outside Cincinnati that is affiliated with an Episcopal convent – yes, there are some Episcopal nuns. It

turned out to be a perfect place, not only for study and writing, but for spiritual renewal as well.

The community where I spent a week is called the Community of the Transfiguration. The story Dave read for us this morning, called the transfiguration, is the key scripture for this group of women and all of the other people who spend time with them. Here's where the serendipity comes in. I was there the first week of August. August 6 is the Feast Day of the Transfiguration, the day that this story is celebrated. I happened to be at the community of the Transfiguration on the Feast Day of the Transfiguration – none of it planned. All purely happenstance.

The funny thing is, I have always struggled with this story. I struggle to make sense of it and to relate to it. I know it's one of the most important stories in the New Testament. I've been told that by seminary professors, I've read that in books. The fact that it's in three gospels testifies to its significance. But when I read the story itself, I struggle.

We know that Jesus always made time for prayer. This time he takes Peter, James and John with him. They are his inner circle. Perhaps he wants their company. Perhaps he wants them to learn to pray like he does.

Luke doesn't tell us that Peter, James and John were praying. We don't know whether they were or not. Luke says that Jesus was praying. And while he was praying, the appearance of his face changed. And his clothes became dazzling white. And then Peter and James and John see a vision of Moses and Elijah talking to Jesus.

Can you imagine how shocked these disciples were to see something like this? When they can finally catch their breath, Peter says, “Jesus, let’s build a little tent up here so the three of you can stay longer and talk to each other more.” But as soon as Peter says this, a cloud appears over all of them. A voice comes from the cloud saying, “This is my beloved child, listen to him.” And when the cloud lifts, Moses and Elijah are gone. After this, no one speaks.

What would there be to say? Peter, James and John knew that they had been in the presence of the holy. They had heard the voice of God. They had seen the face of Jesus shining with a divine light. They had glimpsed the faces of Moses and Elijah, two heroes of their faith. What is there to say after an experience like that?

When Doug and I were at the American Cemetery in Normandy, we walked up and down the rows of white crosses. 10,000 graves on 172 acres. We saw the grave of President Teddy Roosevelt’s son. We noticed soldiers from our home states and soldiers with whom we share birthdays. We walked and walked and we noticed the quiet. We were in a sacred place.

A few weeks later, near the end of our European trip, we took a tour of the Dachau Concentration Camp in Germany. Before we got off the train from Munich, our tour guide said, “You will notice the quiet. Many people simply cannot speak.” Indeed she kept her comments to a minimum and when we asked questions, we almost whispered them. Being in a place where so much human suffering had taken place, it almost takes your breath away.

What is there to say?

There are those experiences in life that change us, that cause us to look at the world differently from that point on.

Peter wanted to stay on the mountain, to turn a transcendent moment into an institution. But Jesus knew better. Jesus knew that living high up in the rarefied air isn't the point of transfiguration. It wasn't for Jesus, and it isn't for us. Those times we spend in holy places, those mountaintop moments of our lives aren't meant to last forever. The point is not to have a private experience of spirituality removed from the public square. Rather, the visions are there to carry us down; they are to be glimpses of unimagined possibility at ground level.*

God's presence changes us, not so that we can walk around with stars in our eyes, but so that we can come back down the mountain and change the world.

When I arrived in Cincinnati for my week's retreat, I had a box of books in my car, and I wanted to make the most of my time away. I was told that I could eat my meals in the convent with the sisters, and I planned to do that. I wanted to run over there at mealtime, and eat, and come back and work. I wasn't there to make friends; I had no intention of getting to know anyone.

But I was drawn into the life of the Community of the Transfiguration. The sisters respected my privacy, but they were so hospitable, so kind, and so interesting. I found myself going over to the convent early, before each meal, to join them in worship. I was completely lost in the Book of Common Prayer, but they patiently showed me how to follow along. They had what they themselves call peculiar customs at meal-time, and they hold to those customs strictly, but

they also laugh at themselves when they forget what they're supposed to do. And they were abundantly gracious with their guests.

One of the younger sisters, Sister Catherine, is probably about 50. She had recently returned from Columbus where she received training in HIV/AIDS prevention. She works with a street ministry in Cincinnati, with the homeless, the addicts, and with the immigrant community. She says, "I draw my strength from interacting with those less fortunate than I. My deep calling is to reach out to others and bring the very real message that we are all God's children and that Jesus loves us for precisely who we are."

I admit I had stereotypes about what nuns were like. I didn't expect them to be pulling iPhones out of the pockets of their habits. I didn't expect them to have a convent Facebook page. I didn't expect to find one who, on her days off, participates in cycling races.

Sister Catherine was an air traffic controller for 24 years. She took a week's retreat at the convent in 2013 and found it to be a transforming experience. She returned for a year to see if the calling of the religious life was the right one for her.

Like Jesus, the sisters spend considerable time each day in prayer. But they don't stay in the chapel all day. They have a neighborhood center for children, they have a school, and they are encouraged to participate in other ministries, like the street ministry to which Sister Catherine is drawn.

Many people come to church to receive comfort, to feel grounded, to experience a sense of sanctuary in a rapidly-changing world. Those are all

appropriate reasons for participating in worship. But perhaps we should put an eye-catching warning sticker on the front of the worship bulletin which says, “Caution. This experience can change your life.” The regular practice of prayer and worship can open us up to God’s life-giving and life-changing spirit. Listening to story after story about a man named Jesus who was killed for his radical ways of thinking and living will not leave us the same. Being a part of a community of people who are called to challenge the status quo, who proclaim values that are different than those of the outside world will not always be comfortable. Even the hymns we sing, which sound so traditional and soothing — if we pay attention to the lyrics we will notice that we are being called to change the way we see the world.

I love this quote by Catherine of Siena: “Be who God meant you to be and you will set the world on fire.” God wants to continually work in our lives, opening us up to new ideas, new ways of thinking and seeing and being, so that we can be the change that the world needs.

Let us pray. Holy one, inspire us in mountaintop moments, in sacred times and places, and then send us back into the world to make a difference for good. Amen.

*quote from Heidi Neumark