

Transfiguration day is one of those weird days in the life of the church. In some ways, it seems somewhat useless, especially when usefulness is defined as “getting the job done,” “accomplishing something.” Many of you are familiar with the saying, “Don’t just stand there; do something!” Today is a day when initially we just stand there.

This is a day when we are taken up on mountains, experience people being covered with clouds, having their clothes and bodies transformed. This is a day when we meet up with a couple of dead guys—Moses and Elijah, figures from the past, representatives of the law and the prophets, men whose deaths always had mysteries surrounding them.

This is a day when I feel as if initially there is little for me to do. Even though as I often say I spend a lot of my time thinking, I am really a do-er. Thinking is for me a matter of doing. In my brain I have a to-do list. Every morning I go after the to-do list, even if the doing is just a matter of thinking. Today, at least initially, I am not experiencing the to-do list.

Transfiguration leaves me wondering. It causes me to be awe-struck. Transfiguration is part of the Bible’s “special effects” that invite me to be amazed, to bask in glory that is not my own. The Book of Exodus says that “the glory of the Lord settled on Mount Sinai, and the cloud covered it for six days.” I get this sense that we are being transported back to creation, to the creative work of God that, obviously, is not our own. Moses waits on God for six days, being covered by the cloud that overwhelms everything on Sinai. And on the seventh day, the day of rest, the day of worship, Moses comes out of the cloud.

This is the *doing* of Transfiguration. At first, it really is non-doing. It’s basking. It’s resting. It’s worshipping. It’s as if we are being given a moment to stop it all for a while and breathe in. Just for a moment we need to be removed from it all. The latest political shenanigans need to

be put on the shelf. The overwhelming responsibilities of the job, the house, the family, the church need to be pushed to the side. This is a day on which to behold, to be grasped by something much larger than ourselves, something more profound than our latest concerns, our biggest fears, or our small visions of what life is about and what the future holds.

I have this sense that many of us seldom allow ourselves to be taken to this kind of place. This may sound a bit trivial, but I am aware of my own tendency to avoid the deeper places, the beholding-and-not-doing places when I go home for lunch after a morning of work. The mornings are often filled with encounters with people, phone conversations, emails, administrative matters of import, intense thought about sermons, educational experiences, and funerals. When I get home after the morning, I quickly put together a lunch, warming up some of my wife's great cooking or piecing together some kind of Bill creation. Then I sit down, and before I eat, I pray. And in that moment, a moment of remarkable silence, something grasps me. It's not so much that I behold something, but something takes hold of me. And even if just for a moment, everything looks different. All the noises of my life, all of the competing demands, all of the urgencies are put in some kind of perspective. The light shines, and I am transformed. The food looks like gift. The time seems saturated with holy presence. The space is penetrated by something big.

In our Psalm for today, we are taken to the two primary traditions of Judaism—the temple tradition and the Mosaic tradition of liberation. It is the former that I want to dwell on for a while. Walter Brueggemann calls this tradition the “tradition of presence.” The temple in Israel's later history was thought to be the focus of the presence of God. It was a very special place for the awe that I have been talking about throughout the sermon. It provided many people a sense that God was indeed available and that God is holy, different, mysterious, beyond description. It enabled worshipers, who were used to the reality of the king, to be grasped by the unsurpassable royalty of

the God of the universe. So the Psalm for today says, “The Lord is king; let the peoples tremble. The Lord is great in Zion, [the city of the temple;] he is exalted over all the peoples. Let [those] peoples praise your great and awesome name. Holy is he.”

This “tradition of presence” takes them to beholding. It takes them to the truly large, the massive, the bigger than life, the glory of the Lord, if you will. In a world where everything we do is thought to be so important, everything that our kids are involved in is believed to be so vital; in a culture in which everything we say is placed under the microscope; in a land where the tiny tyrannizes too many of us; on a planet where water and air are treated not as sacred gifts, but rather simply as means for production; in a culture in which some media are preoccupied with the banal, the most base, the ugly, the violent—in such a world and at such a time, you and I do well to allow ourselves to be taken to the big, the sacred, the holy, “the tradition of presence.”

It really is good for us to say: “The Lord is king; he is exalted over all the peoples. Holy is God.” It is good for us to join the disciples of the Transfiguration story in falling down to the ground and being overcome with awe. Life has this amazing ability, if we are truly open to its depths, to shut our mouths, drive us to our limits, open us to something much grander, much more spectacular than ourselves, our problems, our small dreams, our anxieties, our preoccupations, our addictions, our opinions. God is holy. God is holy other. “Behold the glory of the Lord!”

Now, you practical sorts, you who worry that if we do too much beholding we might not get around to doing anything would be pleased to know that our Psalm for today not only highlights the tradition of presence, it also underscores the second tradition of Israel, the liberation experience that comes out of the story of Moses. But before I go there, I want to say that we might do well to hang in there with the beholding for a while. We would do well to sit in silence for a while, to turn off for just a bit all of the media that turns us into nervous wrecks. Our family lives, our restaurants, our political climate—they all are filled

with so much noise that you and I don't do our best work. Somehow, we are told, through non-ending noise, that everything is vital and everything must happen now. Therefore, we don't think. We don't pray. We don't meditate. We don't sleep on it. We don't **behold** life. And the consequence is scattered and shattered lives, poor public policy, constant political posturing. Don't be afraid to behold. Don't be afraid to lose yourself in the grand, the massive, the sacred.

And now be ready to hear the second tradition of Israel, to hear who the holy one truly is. The Psalm puts it this way: "Mighty King, lover of justice, you have established equity. You have executed justice in Israel." God's bigness, the Psalm is saying, is characterized not by his preoccupation with himself and his own glory. God is not some narcissistic God whose only concern is himself. The God of holiness is the God of justice. The God who is different than all the other gods, Israel is saying, is a God who orders life in a way that brings justice and righteousness to the whole land. That's why God gave the law, we are told. The law is about making sure that the common life of Israel is not marked by injustice, not marked by the neglect of the poor and the vulnerable, not marked by the exclusion of the stranger and the foreigner.

The tradition of Israel begins with a story about one, Moses, who helps liberate his people from the oppression brought about by the Pharaoh. The story of God's people begins with a story of freedom. And if this is their story they will want to make sure that their life together reflects what is at the center of who they are. The Moses story means that their preoccupation will be freedom and justice. The holy God is a just God. The holy God is a God of equity. Those of us who behold this God know that our primary responsibility is the well-being of people, the well-being of community, care and love for all of God's children so that all may share in the bounty of God. Beholding, finding ourselves lost in the holiness of God is not a matter of sitting still and doing nothing. It is a matter of seeing, beholding people in a whole new light so that together we make sure that all are included.

Transfiguration day is our last stop before Lent. It's the last day before we travel with Jesus on a forty-day journey to the cross. Actually, today the light of Transfiguration is a light that is shining on the one who is going the way of the cross, the one who so beheld the holy and just God that his life was poured out for the sake of people for whom God sees with a tender heart. Jesus is going to the cross because he loved people, and he embraced the folks that the world often doesn't include. The light of God is shining today on this one, one called "my beloved Son," telling us that what Jesus is all about is what the holy God is all about. Jesus' life of compassion, grace, forgiveness, inclusion is what the God who is different from all other gods is up to in the world.

Allow yourself to bask in the wonder, the holiness, the bigness of God. Take more time than the world will want you to. And then get to work, joining God in making this world a better place for all.