

Here's my nod to March Madness. A psychology instructor had just finished a lecture on mental health and had proceeded to give an oral quiz to the freshman class. Speaking specifically about manic depression, the instructor asked, "How would you diagnose a patient who walks back and forth screaming at the top of his lungs one minute, then sits in a chair weeping uncontrollably the next?" A young man in the back of the room raised his hand and answered, "A fan of college basketball?"

I've been dealing with a lot of funerals lately, which made me think about how it will all end for me. I think one of my nieces or nephews will unplug my life support to charge their cell phone.

Here is what one of the three eyewitnesses to this miracle of the Transfiguration, St. Peter, said about it years later when he wrote his second epistle: "We did not follow cleverly devised myths when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we had been eyewitnesses of his majesty. For he received honor and glory from God the Father when that unique declaration came to him from the majestic glory, '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 Pet 1:15-18)

Some theologians say the story of the Transfiguration was a legend, a fable, a symbolism, a vision or dream, not a fact but a myth. But Peter, who was there, explicitly says the opposite: "We did not follow cleverly devised myths," but "we had been eyewitnesses." So it's either what Peter said it was, an eyewitness account, or else it's a deliberate lie. The one thing it can't be is a myth, because if what Peter says is true, then it's not a myth, but a fact, and if what he says is not true, then it's not a myth but a lie.

The Gospels are like that. They were either written by eyewitnesses or liars, but certainly not myth makers. (Two of the Gospel writers were Apostles and firsthand eyewitnesses: Matthew and John. Mark and Luke knew the Apostles and repeated their eyewitness accounts.) If this miracle story was really only a myth and not a literal eyewitness account, then it was a deliberate lie for Peter to say it was not a myth but a literal eyewitness description.

So what was really happening on the Mount of Transfiguration? Luke tells us: "They saw his glory." They saw what was really there. This was not an inner vision or a dream – this was fact; this was what was really there. Jesus did not add a new glory in this appearance to his Apostles; He just took the blinders off their eyes to see Him as He really was.

There is a similar story in the Old Testament about the prophet Elisha. The king of Syria sent an army of horses and chariots to capture and kill Elisha, and they surrounded the town of Dothan where Elisha was. "Alas!" (the servant) said to Elisha. 'What shall we do, my lord?' Elisha answered, 'Do not be afraid. Our side outnumbers theirs.' Then he prayed, 'O Lord, open his eyes, that he may see.' And the Lord opened the eyes of the servant, and he saw that the mountainside was filled with fiery chariots and horses around Elisha" (2 Kings 6:15-17).

Notice: God did not put into the young man's mind or eyes this vision of the angel army of fiery horses and chariots; he simply opened his eyes to see what had been there already even when he hadn't seen them. This is true of angels all the time, by the way: they are all over the place, doing their work of guiding us and guarding us, but we can't see them. The same is true about Jesus' Transfiguration: Jesus really is divine and glorious, but our eyes have to be opened before we can see this divine glory. That's what God did on the

mount of Transfiguration: He opened the eyes of Peter, James, and John so they could see Jesus' heavenly glory. It was always there, but He normally kept it hidden.

The same thing is happening in the Eucharist: Christ is really present, but we do not see Him because He is hidden under the bread and wine. That's the word St. Thomas Aquinas used in his hymn for Corpus Christi Sunday: "Adoro te devote, latens deitas." "Latens" means "hiding." Literally, 'I adore you devoutly, deity who are hiding,' or as our JOURNEYSONGS BOOK translates it in this hymn: "Godhead here in hiding, whom I do adore." (#840) He is hiding from us and testing our faith. He is hiding every day in all the events of our lives – in a different way, a different mode of presence, but a real one. He is hiding in every person. Mother Teresa loved to speak of finding Christ in the 'distressing disguise' of the poor. The Jesuits speak of "finding God in all things" because He really is in all things, though invisibly. He is omnipresent but in different degrees – not as present in matter as in human beings.

What are we supposed to do with this vision of Christ's heavenly glory given in the Transfiguration? God Himself answered that question. Peter's answer was the same as a Triangle Developer -- real estate development: he thought they should build 3 chapels there. As Luke politely put it, "he did not know what he was saying."

So what's the right interpretation? What's the point? The right answer is God's answer, and God's answer was simple – and we don't need a degree in theology to understand it: "This is my beloved Son; listen to Him." (all adapted from Peter Kreeft, FOOD FOR THE SOUL, Cycle C, p. 179-181)

So second, some concrete applications. For many of us, daily prayer can become mundane and boring. When that happens, we start finding all sorts of ways to avoid praying altogether. Then we feel bad because we're neglecting prayer. How would we like a little boost to our spiritual life, something permanent we can come away with from our Lenten discipline? A note in the New American Bible for today's gospel points out that the meaning of the mountain of transfiguration is "theological rather than geographical." In other words, the mountain where the apostles saw Jesus transfigured is a reality that transcends time and space. It is not locked into the first-century life of Jesus or the region of Palestine where the story takes place. It's one of those eternal realities that is available to us always, here and now.

So, what glowing glory of God have we seen lately? How about the baby we held in our arms, or the kid that we saw playing in his yard? How about the sky? Maybe it was the sunlight streaming through the barren trees or the late winter moon rising over the hills. There are many wonders that we see every day that can be transfigured by the eyes of faith. And when we see the glory of God in the ordinary things around us, we give thanks and praise a hundred times a day. (adapted from PREPARE THE WORD, Fr. Paul Boudreau, 17 February 2008, p. 3)

Coupled with this is an idea from James Loder, who writes about the Transfiguration: "Transforming moments need to be recognized as sources of new knowledge about God, self and the world, and as generating the quality and strength of life that can deal creatively with the sense of nothingness of so much of modern living."

Loder's study of what he calls 'convictional experiences' begins with an autobiographical account of an experience that transformed his life. He writes of stopping along a highway to help someone change a tire. As he knelt in front of the right front fender, a driver who had fallen asleep rammed the car he was working on, shoving it on top of him. Loder writes, "As I roused myself from under the car a steady surge of life was rushing through me carrying with it 2 solid assurances. First, I know how deeply I felt love for those around

me. The second assurance was that this disaster had a purpose.....At the hospital, it was not the medical staff, grateful as I was for them, but the crucifixes.....that provided a total account of my condition, in that cruciform image of Christ, the combination of physical pain and the assurance of a life greater than death gave objective expression and meaning to the sense of promise and transcendence that lived within the midst of my suffering.” (adapted from LITURGICAL CONFERENCE, Vol 21, #11, Feb 1989, p. 9)

And third and finally, a story of transfiguration. Josh was being bullied by another boy at school. Josh was a regular target of the boy’s abuse. Josh’s mom also knew the bully and, like many troubled kids, knew the agony he was living at home.

Josh would come home from school angry at yet another humiliation at the hands of the bully. Like most parents, Josh’s Mom and Dad wanted to go and confront the kid and his parents. But they didn’t. Instead of advising Josh to punch the kid or signing him up for a martial arts course or threatening the bully’s parents with legal action, Mom asked Josh this: “Josh, is there one thing you like about this kid?”

Josh thought for a while and finally said, “He’s really good at football.”

Knowing Josh and his friends played football at recess, she asked whether the bully was ever chosen. “No way. No one ever wants to pick him because he’s the class bully and they don’t like him.” “And do you ever get to be the captain and pick kids for your team?” Mom asked. “I get the chance every so often,” said Josh. “So next time you’re the captain, why don’t you pick this kid and see what happens?” Josh agreed. At the next opportunity, Josh managed to put aside his resentments and fear and picked the bully for his team.

This started a whole chain of events: Other kids also began picking the bully, the boy started to make friends instead of victims, and soon the bullying itself faded away. All because of a wise, compassionate mom – who asked her son a question we seldom ask of those who harm us; Is there one thing you like about this person?”

This is what the late Archbishop Desmond Tutu called “agents of transfiguration”; Josh puts aside his own anger and hurt, and Mom pauses before reacting as a protective parent. This then brings his tormenter into his circle of friends, transforming the boy’s identity and life. Love that calls us beyond ourselves is transforming – in such love, we can ‘transfigure’ despair into hope, sadness into joy, anguish into healing, estrangement into community. Archbishop Tutu said that the work of “transfiguration....is to work with God so that injustice is transfigured into justice, so that there will be more compassion and caring, so that there will be more laughter and joy, so that there will be more togetherness in God’s world.” I think this is a big part of our response to the command in today’s gospel. “This is my beloved Son. Listen to Him.” Amen. (adapted from CONNECTIONS, 11 February 2024)