

Most of us have heard the Transfiguration story dozens of times. The season of Epiphany ends this way every year – and most of us have been around the liturgical block more than a few times. Year after year, we get a radiant mountain top experience before we head into the darker days of Lent.

But beautiful as this story is, I worry that we often hear it as just an echo from a far-off, distant past. We may be in awe of what happened to Jesus, and to Peter, James, and John, way back then, but do we really open ourselves to the Living Word in a way that might allow something similar to happen to us, here and now?

What if this story is meant to blow open our minds each and every year? And our entrenched sense of ourselves and our worldviews? What if this story marks a leap in the evolution of human consciousness and relationships brought about by Jesus? And the telling and re-telling of it is meant to fundamentally change us as persons and even as a species?

But I get ahead of myself. The Transfiguration is one of the Bible's many "book-end" stories. It's the partner to the story of Jesus' baptism we hear early in the Epiphany season. It's at Jesus' baptism we first hear God announce from the heavens, "This is my son, the Beloved, listen to him."

Many of us take this call to listen simply as God's reminder to pay attention to what Jesus is about to say and do as he goes about his ministry. And that's certainly part of it.

However, the root of the word 'listen' also means to obey, to serve, or to be subject to. Here, as elsewhere, God calls us to listen with much more than just our ears, or even just our hearts and minds. From our earliest days, God has called us to listen and to obey with all our hearts, minds, souls, and strength.

The totally new thing in the story of Jesus' baptism, of course, was the presence of God's Living Word incarnate in a fully human person – a seemingly ordinary guy who was hanging out with other ordinary people, even joining in a popular movement of baptism and renewal. Not surprisingly, it took Jesus' disciples some time to fully get their heads around this Son of God reality. In fact, it's not until they'd followed Jesus for a couple of years, just before the Transfiguration happens, that Peter declared to Jesus, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God." And that's only when Jesus asked point blank who they think he is.

I would suggest that Peter's ability to see Jesus as the Son of God – and later to witness to his transfiguration and resurrection – was possible only because Peter himself was already being born again in Christ's Spirit. Peter's insight happened only because he'd already experienced some sort of change in consciousness, however tentative and sporadic it was. One doesn't come to see the Son of God standing next to you, or even dazzling white on a mountain top, through merely physical eyes -- any more than one hears the Living Word of God through merely physical ears.

But happily, I think this way of seeing and hearing is more accessible than we usually think, even to us ordinary, 21st century mortals. It's true, we cannot muster this up on our own. But these spiritual senses are hardwired in all of us and available to us through God's grace in every moment.

We've all experienced unitive, or mystical, knowing when gazing at a sunset, or holding a baby or a lover in our arms, or while listening to music. And if we've been awake enough to notice, it's likely come through occasionally in more mundane moments – like walking down the street or doing the dishes – when, completely unbidden, our inner and outer perception

opens up in a wholly different way. These moments are truly gifts from God – little transfigurations. But, thankfully, we can predispose ourselves to receive these divine gifts through prayer and other simple spiritual practices, through artistic endeavors and may other ways.

But back to Peter and the Transfiguration. Peter enjoyed only the briefest celebration of his pronouncement that Jesus was the Son of God and the Messiah, when Jesus told him he would be the foundation of his church. Then Jesus pretty immediately began to describe the horrors that lay ahead for them in Jerusalem, including his own suffering and death. Say what?! The Son of the one true God would willingly submit to suffering and death? The Messiah of the Jewish people would be killed? What?!

Jesus went on to explain to this friends that in God's kingdom they must not look to win but instead deny themselves and take up their crosses. They must lose their lives for God's sake in order to find true life. While they'd heard many of these sayings before, they hadn't come in the context of Jesus' impending violent death. I'd guess their heads were spinning around pretty wildly by this point. And perhaps their hearts were already beginning to break open as they set forth for Jerusalem.

After six days on the road – about the time it takes for God to speak a whole new world into being -- Jesus took Peter, James and John up to the mountain top. There, Jesus was dazzlingly transfigured before them – God from God, Light from Light. Wow!

And as if that wasn't enough, Moses and Elijah also appeared -- two giants of their faith who'd had their own mountain top experiences with God. Right before them was dramatically clear confirmation of Jesus' words that he had come to fulfill the Law of Moses and the vision of the great prophets, personified in Elijah. Just Wow!

Still, Peter, good-hearted and impetuous as always, declared how glorious it all was and suggested they pitch tents and hang out and savor it all for a while. But God had something different in mind; something altogether different. God meant to disrupt the disciples' sense of the world and their place in it. God was dislodging the "us and them" and the "might makes right" dynamics that had been the foundation of the world order since the dawn of human civilization.

Usually when we read the transfiguration story, we pronounce God's words from the heavens in much the same way we do at Jesus' baptism: "This is my **Son**, the Beloved; with whom I am well pleased; **listen** to him!" But I wonder if at the Transfiguration, God might have sounded something more like: "**This** is my beloved Son, the one with whom I am well pleased, listen to **him**!" And then punctuated his declaration by having Moses and Elijah disappear.

I believe God was saying in the Transfiguration that Jesus was not only the fulfillment of the law and the prophets, but that he was also a radical rupture from the law and the prophets. An evolutionary leap so great it would ultimately bring a whole new creation alive in Christ – a new way of being a human person and a new social order.

Jesus was taking his friends to Jerusalem so he could engage the powers and principalities of this world face-to-face. But no matter what Jesus had said or done, the disciples still assumed and fervently desired that Jesus would live out the role of the Messianic Warrior King. They wanted Jesus to vanquish the Roman kings, who claimed to be gods, and the religious officials who enabled them. They hoped Jesus would act not only like King David,

but also do what Moses and Elijah had done when people worshiped false gods back in their day. They wanted Jesus to take vengeance.

Remember when Moses ordered the slaughter of thousands after he came down from Mt. Sinai to find people worshipping a golden calf? Moses killed in God's name. Remember when Elijah, after winning a contest of divine pyrotechnics, had hundreds of priests of Baal killed? Elijah killed in God's name. Both Moses and Elijah took revenge, and they claimed to do it at God's behest.

But we must also remember that God did not lead Moses into the promised land and that God had Elijah pass on his prophet's mantle to Elisha. Now here was Jesus, heading to Jerusalem to willingly submit to the worldly powers of violence and death. Jesus would offer himself to the world in this way in God's name. And God said, "**This** is my beloved son, the **one** with whom I am well pleased. Listen to **him!**"

And this isn't just about murder and mayhem. It's about any "us against them", any "might makes right" way of the world, no matter how lethal or how petty. In Jesus, God offered the disciples – and all of us – something completely different from what had come before.

When Peter, James and John fell to the ground in terror as God spoke to them, Jesus helped them up and reassured them, saying "Do not be afraid." He reassured them they needn't be afraid in the presence of God, who is all-loving and all-forgiving, and not in any way vengeful or violent. He was showing them that in God there is no darkness at all. In God there is no death. Jesus promised the disciples they need not even be afraid in the face of the human-generated violence and death so rampant in our world, because God's meekness and vulnerability, God's love and forgiveness, compose the final and eternal Word of Life.

Sadly, I believe the Christian tradition, rooted as it was for so many centuries in the violence of Christendom, has woefully understated this essential reality of God revealed in Christ. God's love, forgiveness, and peace are not just divine ideals. They are the actual and ultimate reality that even now underpins this mess of a world we find ourselves in. God's love and forgiveness and peace are what is really Real. And it is our vocation as followers of Jesus to learn to see and to hear this very Good News both amidst the ordinariness of daily life and in the tragic brokenness of our world. And then to pass it on.

But like I said, there's no magic formula for perceiving this reality. And I'll be the first to admit to getting distracted from it many times a day, especially by the political yammering all around us of late. So I'll just leave you with these reassuring words from a wiser one than me. The American Trappist monk Thomas Merton wrote this during the turmoil of the Vietnam era:

"At the center of our being is a point of nothingness which is untouched by sin and [by] illusion, a point of pure truth, a point or spark which belongs entirely to God, which is never at our disposal, from which God disposes of our lives. . . This little point of nothingness and of absolute poverty is the pure glory of God in us. It is, so to speak, His name written in us, as our poverty, as our indigence, as our dependence, as our sonship. It is like a pure diamond, blazing with the invisible light of heaven. It is in everybody, and if we could see it we would see these billions of points of light coming together in the face and blaze of a sun that would make all the darkness and cruelty of life vanish completely ... I have no program for this seeing. It is only given. But the gate of heaven is everywhere."