

A WINDOW INTO HEAVEN

2 Kings 2:1-2; Psalm 50:1-6; 2 Corinthians 4:3-6; Mark 9:2-9

A sermon preached by the Rev. Theodore S. Atkinson,
Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA

March 5, 2000

"Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and John, and led them up a high mountain apart, by themselves. And he was transfigured before them, and his clothes became dazzling white, such as no one on earth could bleach them." Mark 9:1-3

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN

"Six days" earlier Peter had confessed Jesus as the Messiah. And Jesus had responded, "Yes, but not the Messiah everybody's looking for. I'll be rejected and crucified but you'll live to see my kingdom." Six days later Jesus takes Peter, James and John for a hike up a mountain where they see Jesus transformed before their very eyes. His clothes, stained with sweat and covered with dust, suddenly become dazzling white. They also see, Moses and Elijah, holy people from ages past. And God speaks to them, "This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!" In other words, "Listen to him when he, as the Messiah, disappoints your hopes for military victory. Listen to him when he's betrayed, rejected and nailed to a Roman cross."

Some scholars believe the Transfiguration never happened as recorded. They say it's either a misplaced resurrection appearance or vision of the return of Christ. I take a more traditional view. I believe the story is based on an actual experience which Peter, James and John didn't understand until after the Resurrection. They became aware of a dimension of reality that's always present but seldom recognized. What Peter, James and John experienced still happens today whenever we see God's presence in the ordinary and become aware that reality is far more mysterious and wonderful than we usually experience.

Two years ago, in the autumn when the leaves were red and gold, I spent a week in an Eastern Orthodox monastery. The monastery was located on top of a high mountain in New York State. I took no books other than my Bible. I had no radio or television. I spent the week reading the Bible aloud, praying, and listening for God's voice.

The most important part of the day was corporate worship. The first worship service begins before sunrise. I rise in the darkness, walk to the top of the mountain, and enter the small

wooden sanctuary. Inside the entrance one solitary candle illuminates a large icon or painted image of Christ. In the darkness before sunrise Christ is all I can see. Christ has all seeing eyes which seem to discern my inner thoughts. His right hand is lifted as if to say, "Quiet! Listen!" I bow, make the sign of the cross three times, and kiss his icon before taking my place. There are no pews. We all stand. Black-robed monks, hardly visible in the darkness, stand quietly in a row on either side of the sanctuary. I join a small congregation standing in the center facing the altar. The service begins when the candles on the altar are lit and then throughout the sanctuary. Slowly the interior of the sanctuary fills with light as if by sunrise. I begin to see more clearly. I discover I'm surrounded by the saints in heaven. I see the Blessed Virgin Mary whom the Orthodox call *Theotokos*, the One who gave birth to God the Son. I see Elijah and Moses. Incense is lit and a monk swings the censor before the icons greeting Christ and the saints. Then he swings the censor before us, the saints on earth, in greeting. For an hour we sing Psalms, we pray and we listen to the Word of God in Scripture. Before the reading of the Gospel lesson the abbot of the monastery exhorts us to look only at Christ. "Listen to Christ," he says.

When I leave the sanctuary after the service, the morning sun has risen. I begin to reflect on what happened. Is the real world the one I enter *when I leave the sanctuary*? Or is the real world *within the sanctuary where I see Christ and the saints and listen to his Word*? Both are real. We live most of our lives in the rather small *visible* world that does not easily allow us to see or hear Christ.

But there's another *invisible* world every bit as real as the visible. And when I enter the sanctuary it's like when we look at an ordinary drop of pond water through a microscope. Under a microscope we see the drop of pond water is alive with strange creatures, unseen to the human eye. Entering the sanctuary is like *looking* at the nighttime sky through a telescope. We discover there's far more to see in the sky than is visible to the unaided eye, star clusters, the rings of Saturn, the moons of Jupiter, whirling galaxies, and nebulae illuminated like icons by the light of distant suns. On the mountain top my eyes are opened to a world that's invisible to the unaided eye. And yet it's a world every bit as real as the world in which we usually live and

work. We live our entire lives within eyesight and hearing distance of heaven. We are surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses. God looks down on us through the compassionate and all seeing eyes of the risen and glorified Christ. And sometimes God open our eyes and we see the hidden Christ. God opens our ears and we listen. God opened the eyes of Peter, James and John on the mountain of Transfiguration to see Christ in a way that we can't ordinarily see unless aided by God's grace.

The transfiguration is not something that happened *only* long ago. Transfiguration happens today! God's grace *not only* enables us to see Christ in a Palestinian Jew executed as a criminal two thousand years ago. By God's grace we ^{also} see the glorified Christ in the poor and afflicted. Transfiguration happens again and again. It happened years ago when Elizabeth of Hungary, a thirteenth-century princess, welcomed a leper into her palace and put him to bed. Later, going to tend him, she saw no longer the leper's stricken face, but the face of Christ. Transfiguration may happen again this week when you look into the eyes of your family or your enemy, a school teacher or a crossing guard and see the light of Christ shining in their eyes. And next Sunday, when you enter the sanctuary with all the girl scouts and brownies and their leaders, God's grace *may also* enable us to see the glory of Christ in ordinary bread and wine.

Almighty God,
whose Son was revealed in majesty
before he suffered death upon the cross:
Give us faith to perceive his glory,
that being strengthened by his grace
we may be changed into his likeness, from glory to glory;
through Jesus Christ our Lord,
who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and forever. Amen.