

From time to time I've experienced that reality in worship. When I was at

Spotlight on Jesus

A sermon preached by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on The Transfiguration of the Lord, February 13, 1994. Scripture Lessons: 2 Kings 2:1-12; Psalm 50:1-6; 2 Corinthians 4:3-6; Mark 9:2-9.

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

I read where an anonymous poll of airline pilots showed that far more pilots have seen UFOs than report the sightings. They don't report the sightings simply because they're afraid their superiors will think they're crazy. They're afraid they'll lose their jobs. And, in fact, some airline pilots who have reported UFO sightings have been docked.

Probably all of us have experienced something mysterious, something unexplainable. Maybe what you've experienced is so unexplainable and mysterious that you've been afraid to mention it to anyone. You're afraid people will think you're crazy.

Let me tell you about a strange experience my mother had. She didn't share her story with everyone. She told me, my brother and my two sisters and ^a few other family members. The night my father died my mother dreamed she heard the telephone ring. It was a dream! And in her dream she answered the phone and a voice said, "12. 62." That's all the voice said. "12. 62". My mother woke up somewhat frightened. What did this strange dream mean? Just then, fully awake, she was startled by the telephone actually ringing. It wasn't a dream this time. She answered it. Someone from the hospital told her that my father had taken a sudden turn for the worse. "Come as soon as you can!" My mother looked at the clock. It was a little after midnight. My mother called my brother who came

immediately to take her into the hospital in Wilmington. On the way to the hospital my mother told my brother about her dream. When she got to his room, a nurse came out and said, "I'm so sorry, Mrs. Atkinson. He's gone!" The doctor came in and signed the death certificate. "What time did he die?" he asked the nurse. "It was 2 minutes after one", she said. My mother asked, "What time did you say he died?" "1:02". She turned to my brother and said, "12:62. That's what the voice in my dream said. 12:62! That the same as 1:02."

I don't know how to explain it. Maybe she just made up the story and my brother went along with it. Maybe there's some rational explanation. Maybe she just anticipated my father's death. I don't know. There was a time, not too long ago, when strange experiences like that would have been automatically discounted. Despite the scientific emphasis of our times, George Gallup reports that a majority of modern Americans claim to have had experiences like this.

The Bible faithfully reflects this mysterious element in life. The world of the Bible is a world where the invisible world and the visible world penetrate one another. There's no thick wall separating the seen and unseen. Heaven and earth intersect from time to time. Look at this incident in the life of Jesus that we call the Transfiguration of our Lord.

Jesus took Peter, James and John to the top of the mountain of Transfiguration, and they stand there. All of a sudden they rub their eyes -- they can't believe it. right in front of them they see Elijah and Moses talking together! Elijah, who lived over 800 years before and whom the Bible says was taken up into heaven in a

whirlwind. And Moses! Moses who lived 1,400 years before - Israel's great Law Giver and Liberator who lead Israel out Egypt and as far as the Promised Land.

While they stared, Jesus moves from his three apostles and joins these two men who had lived ages before. He talks with them! They know Jesus. Jesus knows them. Peter, who was terrified like the other two, but never at a loss for words, said, "You know something, Lord? Let's build a tabernacle for Elijah. Let's build a tabernacle for Moses. And let's build a third one for you, in memory of this occasion."

Just then a cloud came down and they heard a voice coming from the cloud, "This is my beloved Son: Listen to him!" And when the sun broke through again they looked around. Moses was gone. Vanished! Elijah was gone. "They saw no one with them any more, but only Jesus." The spotlight was on Jesus.

We're approaching the season of the Christian Year when the spotlight falls with special intensity on the person of Jesus Christ. Today we concentrate on that unique and rather puzzling story of the Transfiguration. This Wednesday Lent begins and from then to Pentecost we seek to re-live with Christ the great events of his suffering, crucifixion, resurrection, and the coming of his Spirit. But in true Christian worship the spotlight is always on Jesus. As Christians we cannot conceive of God apart from Jesus Christ. The will of Jesus Christ is the will of God. The actions of Jesus Christ are the actions of God. The personality of Jesus Christ is the personality of God. We worship God through our Lord Jesus Christ.

One of the things I appreciated about the Eastern Orthodox churches in the

Middle East was how Jesus, the Risen Christ, seemed to be the focus of their art work, their liturgy, and their worship. Most of the Orthodox churches I entered had a large painting or mosaic of the Risen Christ, often painted on the inside of the dome over the chancel area. And all around the risen Christ were angels and saints. There was Peter, James and John with their gaze focused on the Risen Christ. There was Elijah and Moses and other Old Testament men and women - all focusing their attention on the Risen Christ. In those Orthodox churches I felt surrounded, not just by the 35 Presbyterians that went with me on our trip, but the saints in heaven and angels - and above all, the Risen and glorified Christ.

We Presbyterians don't go in for a lot of art work - pictures of saints or even pictures of Christ. With our great puritan reaction against anything that smacks of idolatry - of worshiping the creation rather than the creator - our churches are somewhat plain. In fact, we Presbyterians have emphasized so much the intellect, and reason, and decency and order, that we sometimes miss the mystery and the awe and wonder of the presence of the Risen Christ in our worship.

But if the truth were known - if our eyes were to be opened to the reality of the invisible world - we would see that we are, in fact, even now, joining the saints and angels in heaven when we gather in this fellowship hall to worship God through our Lord Jesus Christ. What those Eastern Orthodox churches symbolize in their art is actually taking place. In true Christian worship the choir, the liturgy, the pastor and everything in the service is meant to point to Christ - like a spotlight in a dark theater pointing to the leading character onstage. In worship,

we join the saints and angels in heaven.

From time to time I've experienced that reality in worship. When I was at Wheaton College, in Illinois I used to attend the morning worship service at Gary Memorial Methodist Church. I attended there because of an experience I had the first Sunday I ever attended my freshman year. The first service I attended there was a communion service. I don't remember anything about the sermon, but I remember how I felt as though Jesus himself was actually there when I went forward to the Communion Table to receive the Bread and the Wine. Jesus is here! Jesus is really ^{here} ~~hear~~! And as I walked forward slowly following behind ordinary men and women of all ages, I sensed that we were not alone. Angels were there. The Old and New Testament saints were really there. I couldn't see of course. It was a feeling of presence. I went back to that church for the next four years. I never again had that experience. I sought it. I wanted it. But it didn't happen. It was ~~a~~ mysterious. It was awesome.

Heaven isn't some far off sphere beyond the stars. Heaven is very close. It intersects the material universe we live in. It touches us. Heaven is wherever God's name is hallowed and his will is done. At any moment a common ordinary bush may burst into the flame of the presence of God as it did for Moses long ago. At any moment we may hear in the wind that howls in winter a whisper from beyond time.

And in worship we draw near to God. In the act of corporate worship common water becomes the water of rebirth and the gateway into the Kingdom of God.

Common bread and wine become for us the Communion of the Body and Blood of Christ. Common, ordinary words become the means by which God speaks to us. And as we sing and praise God in song we join with all the saints and angels in heaven in their worship.

Christ takes us by the hand this morning (and every Sunday) and invites us to climb with him up the Mountain of Transfiguration. As we climb that mountain with Christ we're brought into communion, not only with God, but with the whole company of the redeemed in heaven and on earth. Not only Moses and Elijah but our own loved ones ^{in Christ} who've passed beyond the veil are with us on this holy mount. And then we go back down the mountain, down to our everyday tasks, our business, our work, our play, our schools, our homes. But, in worship, we've seen Christ in his risen glory. We know he's Lord. We know that because he lives we can face tomorrow and whatever it brings.

Let us pray: 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.