The story of the Transfiguration is one of the most bizarre in all scripture. Jesus takes three of his disciples up a “mountain” where he proceeds to pray. Suddenly, as he is praying, Jesus’ face changes and his clothes appear blindingly bright, and two dead prophets – Moses and Elijah – are standing with him. While Peter gropes for a response, a voice from heaven announces, “This is my Son, my Chosen. Listen to him!” What do we make of this ecstatic spiritual experience? How did it impact Jesus? And what did it mean to the disciples who were so freaked out that they spoke of it to no one --- at least for a while?

The word transfigure conjures up images like someone post-facelift or nose job, or members of Star Fleet being beamed back aboard the Enterprise after a scouting trip to a new galaxy. Transfigured. We might think of the Incredible Hulk with his human clothes bursting at the seams, or Harry Potter’s uncle, Sirius Black, morphing into his animagus canine form. It is difficult to imagine what the disciples might have witnessed, but most commentators propose the idea that Jesus’ face was lit up. A shining countenance: now we can relate to that! You know, like the face of a bride as she walks down the aisle, the glow of a new parent holding a child, or the jubilant expression of the field goal kicker who wins the game in the last two seconds. While human experiences of joy can produce this reflection of light on special occasions, there are some people who manifest this inner light more readily. I still remember a friend showing me her slides from Tibet, and pointing out this one she called “a holy man” whose face shone like the sun. Such luminescence suggests the ability that one can see beyond the veil of human existence to the eternal, omni-presence of God’s loving Spirit.

Perhaps you have read or heard of the extraordinary near death experience of Dr. Eben Alexander, a neurosurgeon and religious skeptic who suddenly contracted E Coli Bacterial Meningitis in 2008 and ended up in ICU on a respirator, with no discernible brain activity. While the deadly bacteria attacked his neo-cortex, and doctors held little hope for his survival, Eben Alexander had an out of body experience which he calls venturing into “ultra reality.” While he cannot prove or scientifically verify his story, Dr. Alexander awoke from his coma a week later, declaring that “all is well.” His words sound similar to those of 14th century mystic Julian of Norwich who had her own ecstatic experiences during a health crisis. Dr. Alexander has written and spoken of his experience, and now lives convinced of a much greater reality which he believes is veiled from us by our brains. He now conceives a universe upheld by a Divine Creative Being whose essence is Unconditional Love, and contends that there is a spark of this Divinity in each and every one of us.¹ His story also reminded me of Dr. Jill Bolte Taylor, the brain anatomist who suffered a stroke, and experienced a euphoric oneness with creation as her left brain shut down, and she floated in her right brain’s nirvana-like state.
Have you ever had a mountain top experience and felt an unbelievable spiritual high? Perhaps it occurred at a women’s retreat, hiking in Yellowstone, worshipping with people of another culture on a mission trip, or being present for the birth of grandchild, …

Such mountain top experiences generally do not last. Indeed, they function as glimpses of grace, spiritual sightings if you will. They buoy us and carry us for a while, until we forget or become distracted by life, entrenched in our everyday work.

Luke suggests that this mountaintop experience bolstered Jesus’ calling and identity, and renewed him for his mission. Just a few paragraphs later Luke says “When the days drew near for him to be taken up, (Jesus) set his face to go Jerusalem.” Jesus knew that it was time to face his enemies, to embody God’s justice, love and peace. He also sensed that it would surely mean his departure, his death. Maybe this mountaintop experience emboldened Jesus and sustained him in the journey to Jerusalem and to Calvary. The gospels all describe how he was resolute in his mission from God.

The Old Testament lectionary lesson today describes Moses coming down from Mt Sinai, after encountering God, with his face glowing. The Hebrews understood their leader’s shining countenance as evidence that he had been in the presence of God, but they found it so overpowering and frightening that Moses had to veil his face from then on. In our epistle lesson for the day, Paul writes the church in Corinth saying, “all of us, with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another, for this comes from the Lord, the Spirit.”

Paul reminds us that we have witnessed God’s glory in Christ. As the body of Christ, we live and worship in a community founded and sustained by the Spirit. We come together to open ourselves to this Spirit, be infused with the Spirit, empowered by the Spirit, and sent forth to shine Christ’s light in the world. Different ones of us will experience spiritual epiphanies, transformative moments – in baptism, in prayer and worship, in service and study, possibly in ordination as officers of the church, and in mountaintop experiences in daily life – and the dazzling intensity of these experiences will help illumine, inspire and guide our life together.

But perhaps the paradox lies in this: encounters with the Holy also occur in the darkest valleys of life – as a neurosurgeon lies in a coma with his life hanging in the balance, as a family member or friend lives bravely and fully with cancer, as one faces impotence over a personal demon of addiction, as someone grapples with feelings of rejection and failure in the wake of a divorce.

Jesus met his Abba-Father on another hill – Golgotha – where he cried out in desperation, prayed for his enemies, and finally entrusted himself to God’s eternal care. Indeed, the glory of Christ reveals that there is no human experience which God cannot touch, heal, or transform. Dr. Alexander compares his near death experience to lifting a veil. Like a veil, the brain can function like a filter. While the spiritual realm is always available to us, our brain swirls like a computer rapidly taking in data, organizing it, and weighing possible responses. But the brain also obscures the realm of the spirit unless we take steps to see beyond the veil. How we do this may vary from person to person, but to follow the example of Christ would be to begin devoting time to prayer. Some have found that yoga and meditation help them to quiet the brain and be centered in their breath and the Breath of God. Others find that pushing the body through running, hiking, or swimming, also helps get out of one's head, and create not just a healthier body, but a more open heart and receptive mind.

Let’s face it. Living our faith is counter cultural, and requires us to see life as something very different than who can make the most money, live the highest lifestyle, earn the most degrees, or travel to every continent. We struggle in this world of incessant noise, rabid accumulation, hyper-stimulation and information overload, to see what really matters. And what is that? Greg preached on it last week: Love – love and relationships. Jesus put it this way: “Love God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength, and your neighbor as yourself.”
In this world of competing values and alluring idols, we will always need the Spirit to slow us down, to nudge us in a different direction at times, and to help us see with new eyes. The good news is: whether we are perched on a mountaintop, slogging through a wilderness, or carefully climbing out of a dark valley, we live each and every day knowing that the light of God is not so hidden that we cannot see it in ordinary life. The Spirit of Christ lives, enlivens, infuses, and illuminates every landscape of our world and our lives.

NOTES

2. ibid
3. ibid