

The Tenth Sunday after Pentecost
Celebrating the Feast of the Transfiguration (Transferred from August 6th)
Revised Common Lectionary, Year C

August 5th, 2007

Episcopal Church of Our Saviour
Mill Valley, California

The Eighth Day
The Rev. Richard E. Helmer

Today marks one year, almost to the day, since I first stepped up in this pulpit to deliver a sermon for a Sunday worship service at Church of Our Saviour. And what a year it has been! We have gotten to know each other a bit, looked backwards towards the past and forward to the future. We've gotten in and out of each other's way, laughed together, cried at times together, stood up to be counted when it mattered, and quietly furthered the work of the People of God. We've prayed together, shared the common cup and the body of Christ, fondly said farewell to good friends and welcomed new ones. We've helped strangers and companions on the journey with us. We've cleaned cobwebs out of the church corners and chased bats out of the belfry. We've invited a few skeletons out for a good airing and put them back into perspective, washed some of the blood off the woodwork and polished the brass. We've brought new staff on board. . . and the list goes on and on.

It's been a year. And so this month the Vestry shifts back into full gear and holds another town meeting next week about. . .well. . .me. So, with an ounce of sense still left, my family and I are quietly out of pocket next weekend! Later in the month, we hold a mutual ministry review, and in September the formal end to this strange process of "Long-term Interim" will draw to a close one way or another with the Vestry voting to decide whether this is a "good fit" for all of us.

Yes, it's been a year – a full cycle. But completions of a full cycle have a great deal more about them than just an election to determine who gets to be rector. The completion of a cycle means a new start, a new direction, a new beginning, and even an opportunity to step out of the cycle all together and see from the mountain top.

Today's Gospel reading, the story of the Transfiguration, begins in Luke with this

phrase: “About eight days after Jesus had foretold his death and resurrection.” Eight is a strange number. Seven would surely be more appropriate. We are tempted to obsess over there being seven days in the week, a theme that harkens back to the earliest scripture. But Luke moves the timeline of the narrative along by proclaiming the Transfiguration happens about the eighth day. A cycle is complete, I hear Luke saying with this expression. Jesus is turning towards Jerusalem and the revelation of who he is and will be is approaching a climax.

The Transfiguration on the mountain top presages the Resurrection, but it also reaches back into the great past of the disciple’s spiritual tradition with the appearance, too, of Moses and Elijah. We are reminded of Moses’ sojourn with God on Mount Sinai, of what enlightenment might mean in the Judeo-Christian tradition – literally *en-lightenment* – of being filled from the inside out with the light that comes from God.

Time appears to have stopped. On the eighth day, Peter, John, and James have stepped with Jesus for a moment out of the familiar cycle, over the edge, and into a timeless, holy space where all of history is as one, and the great and holy ones, even if dead, are found alive and fully revealed as God’s glorious children. It is a taste of heaven, the revealed Kingdom of God, the Reign of the Great and Holy One.

For many Christians around the world, the expressions Kingdom of God, Kingdom of Heaven, and eternal life have a “down the road,” “at the end,” “after I’m dead or the Second Coming has happened” quality to them. In the popular mind, we spend our lives being tested for this great reward at the end of all things. If we persevere, we may attain it, perhaps by God’s grace. If we fail, we might risk being divorced from it forever.

But the Transfiguration shares with us a much more intimate and dangerously close experience of heaven: one that is much more familiar to mystics and saints across the ages. Dangerous because it is transformative. Intimate because it is on the ground with us if we dare to let it in. Jesus told his disciples that the Kingdom of Heaven was among them. At least one of the non-canonical gospels goes even further, having Jesus say the Kingdom of Heaven is *in* them, and *in* us. As though we carry the seeds of eternal life already germinating even in our regular and often mundane lives.

Most of us have learned at the gut level from time to time that this may indeed be true. We pinch ourselves because we can scarcely believe it. But we’ve had those

experiences of being on mountain-tops, of seeing the world afresh and unspeakably beautiful, filled with the glory of God, as though we were newborns with eyes open again with wonder. On one occasion or another, sometimes waking, sometimes dreaming, we've stepped out of time, over the edge, beyond the cycle of our everyday lives and into timeless moments that touch on eternity, the holy now. . . Where the real power of love and true joy have been revealed in all their glory, where the glorified Christ has spoken to us as though he were next to us, talking to us directly, or inside of us, speaking out of the deepest and most wondrous places of our hearts.

These experiences are radically transformative. Like the Peter, James, and John, we will often find them dumbfounding and we can barely pluck up the courage to speak of them. They seem to come from outside of time and completely alter our cycles, push us into new paths of life, steal us for a moment from the power of ego and set us free to take a baby step into a new way of being.

And then the moment comes when we blink, and, like Peter, James, and John, we clumsily begin acting on the desire to encapsulate the feeling, the moment, the place, or the timelessness of it all. And like an old clock, the wheels of time begin to turn again, grinding away in the familiar pattern, and we are back in the cycle. . . and yet. . . altered somehow.

Completing one cycle can mean we are caught up in the drudgery of beginning another one. "Here we go again." As though business as usual will be our fare for the foreseeable future. This is our great temptation as a church community – the spiritual dangers of treading only familiar territory and forgetting our call as Christians into the challenging and sometimes painful growth that God in Christ offers us.

And yet we at Church of Our Saviour, as a community of the People of God at the end of a cycle, are now teetering on entering an eighth day as a community – a special time of prayer and discernment, and perhaps an encounter with the Transfigured Christ in our midst. Some of us will dare to climb that mountain with Christ and risk transformation that will leave us speechless for a time. Others, like the rest of the disciples or the People of Israel, will stay at the foot of the mountain, remain in the cycles of this life, and await word. You and I get to choose this day, and every day, how we will be part of the story of the Transfiguration. But regardless of our choice, the message is the same:

God's glory is breaking into our lives by guess or by golly, by hook or crook, through the cracks, seams, and accidents of grace. And that means we are always living on the cusp of change, transformation, and hope. We are called to live as our spiritual ancestors in the Celtic tradition lived – near a thin place, where the laws and rules of the everyday break open as heaven and the Spirit of God are close at hand. We surround ourselves with signs of thin places, from the beauty of our worship space, to the timeless quality of communion, to the lifting up of music and prayer.

And our call as a community is to make that thin place as available and palpable to as many people as we can, calling forth and nourishing towards growth in them the seeds of the Kingdom of God, showing them the glimpse of heaven that lives close at hand, among and within us, ready as it is to remake lives, drawing us together into communion with the living and the dead, and ready to transfigure a broken world and free the People of God and all Creation for an eternity.

Amen.