

EXTREME MAKEOVER - ONE DAY AT A TIME

A SERMON PREACHED THE LAST SUNDAY OF EPIPHANY SEASON, FEBRUARY 26, 2006

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Gospel appointed for Last Sunday of Epiphany, Year B:

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. And there appeared to them Elijah with Moses, who were talking with Jesus. Then Peter said to Jesus, "Rabbi, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah." He did not know what to say, for they were terrified. Then a cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud there came a voice, "This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!" Suddenly when they looked around, they saw no one with them any more, but only Jesus. As they were coming down the mountain, he ordered them to tell no one about what they had seen, until after the Son of Man had risen from the dead. Mark 9:2-9

Well, the Winter Olympic Games are concluded, and the general scuttlebutt reflected in the headlines, "America's team disappoints," has broadcasters and media promoters worried about the future. Apparently, ratings were down by the viewing audience, and speculation how to turn things around before 2010 in Vancouver is already underway.

Some humorists on NPR's broadcast yesterday of the comedy-quiz show, *Wait, Wait, Don't Tell Me*, had a couple ideas how to spike interest next time around. One suggested a new event combining the Giant Slalom with quail hunting. Another thought a "survivor" theme added to pair figure skating might do the trick. "Imagine," they quipped, "two lovely couples go out on the ice, only one returns ..."

Such dark humor is funny to some of us, perhaps for the very reason those things that sometime strike uncomfortably close to reality leave us with little other than nervous laughter. While we know the Olympic games are a meant to promote international harmony and goodwill through competition and good sportsmanship (despite the drug-testing scandals, and team members sniping at each other on camera), somehow two weeks of "games" just seemed a little out of place this time around; a little disjointed and disconnected from the rest of the daily news broadcasts. "130 die in sectarian strife in Baghdad." "Terrorist plot to blow up the largest oil refinery in the world foiled" And, "Mellow American snowboarders perform spectacular aerial feats on Italian slopes."

There was, in fact, one American performance that was a particularly outstanding and extraordinary achievement. Yet it didn't happen on the snow or the ice, but only after he'd won his medal, received his accolades and that bonus prize money the American competitors receive if they win. It was American speed skater, Joey Cheek, after he donated his \$25,000 to *Right to Play*, the international, non-profit organization that promotes the idea that children who learn to play together stand a better chance of growing up to become adults who can live together in peace.

In an interview I heard, the now-famous athlete explained his decision in a remarkable way. He started out with a familiar enough story; how, as an inline skater he was inspired eight years ago, after watching a German speedster on ice. From that moment on, he had dedicated himself to a personal goal of being the fastest skater in the world. We've heard this kind of story before.

But then he went on to observe how the dedicated life of an Olympic athlete was an incredibly selfish endeavor; and that after eight years of self-indulgence he had realized it was more than time to do something for someone else, something significant.

That's a remarkable story and an achievement of Olympic proportions. One could say the usual image of an Olympic athlete got an

"extreme makeover." But I'd say it's a story of transformation, the transformation of Joey Cheek; and it didn't happen in an instant; but rather one day at a time, over the course of eight years, not just minutes and split-seconds of one Olympic race.

This story of transformation is a *good-news* story. It's the stuff of "gospel." Here's the connection:

Epiphany season ends the way it began. God is first revealed beneath the shimmering light of a star over a Bethlehem stall, with the unearthly radiance of God born among us in the lowliest of earthly realms.

The season always concludes when we read one of the three synoptic gospels account of the Transfiguration. God's revelatory light shines once more in resplendent glory on the mountaintop, signaling the finale to Jesus' all-too-brief earthly ministry, his words and ways. After the spectacular performance, after he comes down from the highest earthly pedestal, Jesus turns his face to Jerusalem, the journey to the cross, and the beginning of the end.

In between those two stories, there has been the long train of faithful followers, curiosity seekers, detractors and critics, the sick and lame, the hungry, lost and fearful, the demon-possessed. All have sought to see something in Jesus.

"Let our eyes be opened," the blind beggars have shouted. "Cure, and calm, and startle the dead to life again," others have plead. In all sorts and conditions of what we would ask of any wonder worker at our beg and call, Jesus has tried to respond to our incessant demands and wishes, with compassion and pity; all the while saying, in as many words, *listen to my words, and look upon my likeness*.

The psalmist's old words of longing echo in the flesh revealed: "You speak in my heart and say, 'Seek my face.' Your face, Lord, will I seek. Hide not your face from me, nor turn away your servant in displeasure." (today's appointed Psalm 27:11-12)

In echoing reply, I hear those words of Jesus from the beatitudes: "Blessed are those who are humble, and merciful, and hungry for justice, and righteousness and peace," for "they shall see God."

So there, one day, after trudging up the mountainside alongside Jesus one day, Peter, James and John find themselves in a place of near ascension, with their heads in the clouds, and so close to a moment of divine revelation they could almost reach out and touch the hem of heaven.

It is a place where time stands still, and past and future know no bounds; where the law of Moses and words of the prophet Elijah – both long dead and gone – are as real and alive and present as ever before. They are there to bear witness, along with the stumbling and stuttering disciples, to the culmination of this divine manifestation. In other words, they are about to witness Jesus' *extreme makeover*; to once and for all, look upon the dazzling face of God – if but for an instant – and live to tell about it.

In one single sentence, Mark tells the story: "And he was transfigured before them." That's it! What was it like? Simply, with the radiance of his dazzling white get-up – whiter than any earthly bleach could possibly make it -- Jesus is changed from once being very much of *this world*, to *out of this world*.

And then a voice coming out of the clouds, as if from all directions at once, and filling their heads with a sound that – who knows? Maybe it knocked them off their feet like booming thunder. Or maybe it was like something you only hear in the silent spaces, when you turn off all the other noises and distractions clamoring around you. “This is my Son, my Beloved one.” And then the command -- or at least suggestion -- “Listen to him!”

Listen, and look with the ears of your heart and the mind’s eye. Look and see and hear the way of the Lord, your God. And what you hear and see is something that must be almost too incomprehensible and too terrifying for this old world in all its implications.

Descending back down the mountain to the places where you and I plod through our daily lives, Jesus enjoins his disciples, “don’t tell anyone until ...” Until the story is complete; until what you have heard and seen for in instant on the mountaintop can be understood as resurrection of life on level ground, and for all eternity.

The important thing about the story of the Transfiguration, I like to say, is that it’s less about Jesus, and more about us. On a mountain one day, Jesus is transfigured; but the disciples are transformed. The flashy show of light and shadow, appearances and disappearances, includes not only the vocal endorsement of Jesus’ divinity, but that command (or suggestion) to stop, look and listen; then heed what he has said and done, and do something about it ourselves. What are we to do? Jesus is transfigured, in order that we might take the hint and become transformed.

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I recall Paul’s words, “Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect.” (Romans 12.2)

Now frankly, transformation is not a very ordinary thing, nor does it usually happen overnight. Like my own unwelcome transfiguration. It’s not something that normally occurs to me when I roll out of bed in the morning, shower and pick out the most dazzling outfit I may have to put on, look in the mirror and decide for myself, “I think I’ll get myself transformed today!”

I may look, and then look again at that old mug, and occasionally realize the hair’s a little grayer, or the wrinkles around the eyes are spreading like spider webs; but more often the changes are a gradual, creeping bugaboo that silently, persistently assaults me.

It isn’t merely our outward appearance, of course. The visible changes often reflect the inevitable and almost unnoticeable progression and resistance to change. As much as we don’t change overnight, there’s also the reluctance to change at all if we could do otherwise. But how can we ever be transformed, except by changing, even one day at a time?

In her book, *Scarred by Struggle, Transformed by Hope*, writer Joan Chittister speaks of the struggle to change:

“The traditional model of change calls for the dodged endurance of pain. This is a “stiff upper lip” standard that represses hurt and sacrifices the self. It arises from male-dominated societies that measured the worth of a man by the amount of pain he could endure. In such cultures women, arbiters of the feelings of humankind, were simply left to wait their weakness away and endure. But with the loss of feelings comes the loss of the right to be human, to change, and to grow. The whole process of coming to wholeness through being willing to take the learning of the past to the challenges of the present shrivels in the face of denial. In the traditional view, struggle required one of two things: that what could not be endured be changed, or that what could not be changed be endured. Missing from the lexicon of options was the notion that we ourselves could do more than endure: we could be transformed by the possibility of new beginnings.”

I look around us, and I see in this old world in a state of trembling convulsion, on the verge of erupting into total chaos. Consider the tragic folly of all the scars and wounds of conflict that are the result of struggling to change the things we can’t endure. As well as the quagmire of merely trying to endure the things we cannot change. Missing in one sad story after another is the notion of this third notion, whose face we might yet seek; were it not for prideful, stubborn ignorance and arrogance. That we might instead be transformed ourselves.

But the Transfiguration story is ultimately more about Peter, James and John than Jesus. It’s more about our transformation than Christ’s transfiguration. There is a kind of inevitability to my own gradual transfiguration. I’m seeking something else. In the psalmist’s words, “Your face, Lord, will I seek.”

This week we begin that season of pilgrimage we simply call Lent. It is meant to be a time for transformation, not mere transfiguration. But having made this pilgrimage a few times before, I have a hunch it won’t happen in an instant. For most sojourners it will not result in any extreme makeover either. We’ll take forty days and nights to do it. And we’ll do so with the hope, faith and promise that we will still indeed be changed into his likeness one day; and only when we indeed listen to his words and ways.

Amen. jb+

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