

“Changing Faces” / Luke 9:28-36 / 10 February 2013

It seems like just yesterday, we were lighting the Advent candles. Now already at the Mount of Transfiguration, we stand with Jesus on a Galilean hilltop, straining our eyes toward another ridge, far-off Jerusalem, that city set on a hill, where all Jesus’ life, and the life of our world, will come to its literal crux, its crossroads, its cross. Gaze for a moment from this summit to the next, before the long, slow descent into Lent. Every year, before we follow Jesus on the march to Jerusalem, with its upper room and its garden of tears, Jerusalem with its courtroom and its cross, we pause for just a moment at the top of this Mount of Transfiguration to be reminded that after the journey through suffering, Easter morning dawns at last.

Life sends us those occasional moments of transfiguration, so dreamlike and brief. Life sends us moments when our faces shine. But then the moment fades. The glory fades. Those shining faces stop their shining. And then we have a choice: we can either orient our living toward the past, trying to recapture a rapturous moment, longing again for that singular mountaintop vision, or we can slog through the dark days ahead in our forward-marching quest for the greater wonders of Easter morning. And so, how shall we live? Do we cling to the fading splendor, or do we seek a better glory yet to come?

Several years ago, I was invited to review a book for a broadcast of the National Public Radio station out of State College. In theory, I got to choose the book that I would review, but they said “no” to every title I suggested. They wanted it to be something of local interest for central Pennsylvania, and so they pointed me in the direction of a newly published book called *Plain Secrets: an Outsider among the Amish*, by Joe Mackall.

I welcomed an opportunity to read a book about the Amish because I grew up around them. Both of my parents worked late—my father only coming home from Pittsburgh on the weekends—and so the school bus used to drop my siblings and me off every weekday at an Amish farm. There, we stayed with the Coblentz Family until late in the evening, when my mother came to pick us up. While there, we helped the Coblentz children with their chores: feeding the horses, picking vegetables from the garden and fruit from the orchard, pumping water from the well. At night, all of us would gather around the kerosene lamps for a very silent, somewhat awkward few hours with no TV, and no radio, and not one book in the entire house except for a Bible in some archaic German dialect. My first crush was on an Amish girl named Fannie Coblentz. And so, while it wasn’t my first choice, I did find Mackall’s nonfiction book about the Amish engrossing. The Amish are perpetual curiosities; everyone wants to look at them. Most people take a vague sort of comfort in the fact that there are still folks in this world who live like them. We’ll watch TV reality shows about Amish kids who go bad. Some of us might go so far as to read books about them, as long as it gives us our 60 seconds of fame on the local radio station. People remodeling their homes or purchasing furniture will often seek out Amish labor, since their work is such high quality. People have a strange admiration for them, but they still aren’t getting much in the way of converts. The book I reviewed is the account of one man’s decades-long friendship with an Amish family out in Ashland County, Ohio. Mackall, a college professor, writes his book to try to correct some misperceptions about his Amish friends.

It’s a funny book in places, and tragically sad in others. Take Mackall’s description of the dating rituals of a certain Amish sect in his region of Ohio. After the Sunday church service, which lasts from about 9am until 7pm, breaking only for meals,

the youngsters are allowed to hang out together for a few hours...for the purpose of choosing a spouse. (Contrary to popular belief, the Amish do get to decide whom to marry.) To be young and marriageable among the Amish means anywhere from 17 to 21; to be older than 21 is to be fairly long in the tooth. (Reason #101 why I could never be Amish: when I was 21, I was still far too immature and full of myself to ever get married! Reason #102, is that I'm a little bit afraid of horses.) But, after ten hours of Sunday worship, the marriageable folks get to stay at the home where the services were held. The single men all sit on one side of a long table. The single women all sit opposite the men. And they sing hymns in Pennsylvania Dutch for an additional two hours. (Are you starting to like being Presbyterian yet?) Then, at about 9pm, the singing stops, and the dating begins! A boy will approach a girl who has caught his eye, from over the top of his hymnal, and he'll ask her for a date.

As first dates go, things get just a little bit racy for my tastes. The boy and the girl get into the boy's buggy and ride back to the girl's house. Some churches allow their young folks to go straight to the girl's bedroom, where they will lie in bed, side by side, fully clothed and talk until morning. Falling asleep on a first date, of course, is typically a deal breaker in any culture...and that goes for Amish couples, too. And just to make sure that the couple doesn't fall asleep, or give in to temptation, some Amish groups make the couples sit bolt upright in an unpaddinged, wooden rocking chair. The woman sits on the man's lap, and they talk until the sun comes up. If there's a romantic spark—if indeed a romantic spark can survive a night in a wooden rocking chair, after twelve hours of church—then they may date again, and eventually get married.

Mackall goes on to say that most non-Amish folks think that Amish are just trying to turn back time, that they're trying to recapture some bygone era, fleeing the hassles and stresses of contemporary life. Outsiders tend to think that the whole lot of them are trying to live each day as an episode of *Little House on the Prairie*. But, he says, the Amish aren't trying to keep time in a bottle; they're just keeping to themselves and minding their business. They're not nostalgic about any lost innocence or bygone days. No, few people know or care less than the Amish about history. They're just following Amish rules, rules about living simply and humbly. For them, it all comes down to maintaining strong community ties. Cars destroy community—which we're beginning to discover. Televisions destroy community. Telephones and FaceBook are a poor substitute for actual face-time. Keeping time in a bottle is not so much an Amish issue as it is an issue for all us modern folks who look at them and think, "Ah, what blessed and happy lives they have. No deadlines. No cell phones. No early mornings stuck in your car between Greentree and the tunnel." Hanging on to a moment in time is not necessarily the Amish way. It's the human way. Oh, surely you've wanted to turn back time, every now and again. Or at least grab it by the tail to slow its rapid march. Surely you know what it is to reach out and clutch for a passing moment, only to feel it slip like a shadow between your fingers.

It is our way to grasp at the past and at passing moments. It was the disciple Peter's way, too. We all know the story. Just before the journey to Jerusalem and his death, Jesus takes his three favorite disciples up to the top of a mountain, and there in an ecstatic moment of realization, they see him not as a footsore itinerant preacher, but as something far more, the very Son of God. They've known him as a healer, a prophet and a rabbi. They're hoping he'll be a military leader, too, to free their country from Roman

occupation. But in the end, they really know very little about this friend of theirs, this man they're following. So he pulls them aside, and gives them just a glimpse of something more; he lets them see through the layer of dust—if only for a moment. Gazing out toward that other summit, far-off Jerusalem, the place where they all have a date with destiny, somehow they see Jesus in a whole new light, transfigured, and accompanied by those great heroes of their faith: Elijah and Moses. Jesus is giving them a moment to remember in the dark days ahead. He's giving them a little hint of resurrection, on this side of suffering, and we all need those moments of insight, those moments of clarity to hold onto when the going gets rough.

I think by far the most striking thing about this Transfiguration story, to me, is the disciple Peter's sad insistence that he can make that moment of glory last. He says, "Oh, it's a good thing for us to be here! Let me build three dwellings, three lean-tos, one for you and one for each of our distinguished guests. I'll build you some nice shelters to keep the sun off your heads. And we can just live here; we can stay up here forever, basking in the brightness of this moment."

What Peter doesn't know, and what it takes us all so long to learn, is that the glory never lasts. There is no beauty without transience. There is no glory that is not fleeting. Ours is not to build shelters to contain the good old days. Ours is not to grasp as long and as hard as we can the fading vision of all that we desire. Ours is not to remain the same, but to find God in all the changing faces of our life. Even after the glory fades.

I read a news article recently about a Brazilian man named Leandro who was taking out the trash when he made a remarkable discovery. Leandro's elderly father had died several weeks earlier, and the adult children were cleaning out his house. The father was something of a packrat, and there was a lot of work. As Leandro carried a bag to the curb, a neighbor asked him, "Why are you throwing away that turtle?" Leandro looked and discovered an old family pet tortoise, Manuela, that had been missing since 1982. And she was alive! Thirty years ago, they had the house remodeled, and everyone assumed that Manuela had wandered off when the workmen left the backdoor standing open. In the wild, tortoises eat fruit, and bugs, and carrion, and animal feces. The family speculates that for thirty years Manuela had been living in a crowded storeroom of the house, probably eating termites. But, they say, she looks exactly as she looked on the day she went missing.

Such is not the case for you and me. Our faces change over the course of thirty years, along with everything else about us. Think about the face of the person you most love. How has that face changed since the first time you laid eyes upon it? Think of all the intervening years of blessings and loss, all hardships, and graces, and silent moments. Consider the winters that have stretched it, the sunlight that has spotted it! How will that face change before all is said and done? Its changes will never diminish your love, but maybe even deepen it, enhance it. Every change along the way, every new phase of life is its own good transfiguration! Ours is not to remain the same, but to find God in all the changing faces of life.

The problem is that we think God is about sameness. We try to capture the glory in a bottle, build a shelter to contain it, keep it safe forever. And when we see that it has escaped us, we try in vain to bring back a bygone glory. And in the process of that vain attempt, we miss out on a present glory erupting in a new and present way, a different kind of glory, but glory nonetheless. Oh, the wonder of living in the moment that we're

given, the only moment we have for sure. And as it too slips from our grasp, looking to the beauty of life's changes like a child's kaleidoscope, all the colors separating, then merging, then coming together in new ways we never expected. There's wisdom in letting go and moving forward to the next mountain peak.

An old college friend of mine emailed me recently, a very talented artist who had to give up his art when he learned that good art didn't necessarily pay the bills. For about fifteen years, now, he's been a stay-at-home dad while his wife works two jobs to keep the family afloat. He misses his art, but he's all up to his elbows, now, in a different life. Speaking of his art, he says, "Someday when there are no more diapers to change, and I'm a bit more free, I'll try to relight the flame. My biggest fear is that when that day comes, the lights won't work, the room will be dim, all the colors will run into gray, dust will be thick on my pens and brushes, paper will have taken on a dingy hue, my head like my heart will be empty, and my hands won't know what to do." And I said to him, "Wow. Can I quote you?" And yet, this same friend for all his sadness can't speak to me without telling me in the greatest, most insignificant detail, and with breathless excitement, how his kids are doing in sports, how they like school, how one of them just said the funniest thing... Every step along the way is a transfiguration, with glory of its own. And we might just miss today's glory if we try to build shelters for yesterday's.

Our faith is transfigured, too, sometimes. This is perhaps the hardest thing about church—aside from committee meetings: People think that faith—of all things—should be changeless, and so any change in our faith must be a loss of faith. But it's not. All living things are in a constant state of change. Faith, like our faces, is forever altering and transfiguring. Faith's changes are just new faces on the same old Christ who led us up the mountain. But sometimes we build shelters on the mountaintop, hoping to contain the glory of our faith just as it is. Then the moment passes. The glory seems to fade. And we're left to hover around these empty shelters, while Jesus is already on his way back down the mountain, leading us on to new duties and new callings, new depths of service and discipleship on the road to Jerusalem with its other pinnacles and summits. Ours is not to remain the same, but to find God in all the changing faces of life.

Oh, but how we cling, allowing our yesterdays to hinder our todays, to steal their joy. Maybe you're young, and you can't wait to move on to the next thing in your life: college, a career, the big world. Maybe you're not young anymore, and it feels like your best and brightest days are behind you. Maybe you've just made that sad, grownup realization that despite it all, you're just not where, or who, or what you'd hoped you would be. Every time in life is an in-between time. And each one of them a transfiguration full of glory just waiting to be noticed. Today has treasures of its own, but they cannot be compared to yesterday's or tomorrow's. Whatever your circumstance in life, take today for what it is: another step along the good journey. Take today for what it is: another gift that you never could have given yourself, as full of potential and new life as tomorrow, as full of beauty and wonder as yesterday. In each new circumstance of each new day, pause and simply ask, "God, let me see your face in *this* situation." In boredom, in joy, in anxiety, in illness, in triumph, at the grocery store, in your car, "Show me your face in *this* time, in *this* place." You will find that, behind all the changing faces of your days, you're still journeying with the One who led you up this mountain to begin with. And there are yet more summits to reach. Amen.