

We've come to the end of another season of Epiphany. Here on the edge of Lent, may we journey into this new season and be sensitive to the ways and the times that God is present in our lives and in the life of the world.

We turn with Jesus toward Jerusalem and the mount of Calvary, and we pause on another mountain for one of those God experiences.

The ancient ones understood the mountaintop as a place where divine encounter took place. Sister Joan Chittister says that "mountains—in Greek, Hebrew, Roman, and Asian religious literature were always places where the human could touch the divine." Our Gospel read connects us with this ancient understanding of the mountaintop as a place where the divine could be seen and encountered in tangible life-changing ways.

Peter, James, and John got much more than a brief taste of this! They had one of those intense, ecstatic experiences that might have transformed their lives then and there, except that they didn't know exactly what to do with it all when it happened.

Sleepy-headed Peter, the text says, practically babbled, "*not knowing what he said*". Peter, the extrovert, who is never shy about making his opinion known. He starts talking..and thinking..and making suggestions. He blurts out, "*let's build 3 memorials—one for Jesus, one for Moses, and one for Elijah*".

Peter attempts to create permanence around whatever happened. He wants to keep them all where they are, for the moment is so good for him and the disciples. They are in the midst of something profound and the best that Peter can offer is the suggestion to keep it all contained—to leave it on the mountaintop, in a booth, on display. I'm sure he was trying to be helpful!

Don't we all sometimes think that every situation or scenario requires us to DO something? Well-intentioned, no doubt, but as R. Alan

Culpepper puts it, “faithfulness is not achieved by freezing a moment; instead “faithfulness follows God in trust toward the future.”

We are called back to the voice of God in the story: “This is my Son, my chosen, listen to him!” Lori Brandt Hale imagines a “cosmic hand” from heaven, “reaching down to give Peter a good ‘you-are-missing-the point’ slap upside the head. You might even imagine God’s annoyance that Peter didn’t have sense enough to remain silent at such a moment.

Peter IS very much like many of us. We often try to talk our way into understanding—try to process an experience so that we can absorb its meaning and then make that meaning part of who we are. That’s to be expected, because we humans, after all, are meaning-seekers. But this story is, first, about Jesus and who Jesus is, and the disciples are invited into an incredibly intimate moment with him, when God speaks of God’s own child.

One simple command of “*listen to Jesus.*” Stop the talkin’ and listen for a change! To stop and pray—to be open to and strengthened by God’s unexpected and indescribable grace.

That simple command—“*listen to Jesus.*” Often it seems that we find that single command as challenging as all ten of the Commandments given to Moses.

In our story, Jesus has told those gathered what’s expected of him and also what will be expected of them as well. It seems that Peter and the others are not so keen on these words of Jesus about suffering and death; after all, they’re probably hoping for deliverance from, or maybe even triumph over, their enemies—the Romans. But Jesus hears another call, and he follows it faithfully, inviting his friends, and us, to come along.

Barbara Brown Taylor’s sermon on this text, “Thin Places,” is a great starting point for our Lenten journey on the path with Jesus. She spends little time analyzing what happened up on the mountaintop that day (or down below afterward). In fact, she describes the

Transfiguration as something too daunting to talk about, even though its presence in the Gospels has spurred countless folks down through the ages who have tried to explain its meaning. (That's what we humans do with such experiences.) Instead, Taylor talks about "thin places." She writes as a preacher who knows the Bible, a pastor who senses what goes on in the human heart, and a seeker herself who traveled to Ireland where her understanding of "thin places" was deepened by a pilgrimage up (and back down) a holy mountain. Like our ancestors in faith in ancient times, we humans search for God, but we won't be persuaded by scientific proof or logical arguments about the truth we seek. We want to experience God, not just acquire head-knowledge about God. She then describes the thin places so cherished in Celtic spirituality as "cracked doors" that give us a glimpse of heaven and a sense of God's presence.

Many years ago, I took a pilgrimage with some folks from Plymouth Congregational to the tiny Isle of Iona. It lies off the west coast of the Isle of Mull in Scotland—and is barely three miles long by one mile wide. But Iona has had an influence out of all proportion to its size on the establishment of Christianity in Scotland, England, and throughout mainland Europe. Iona's place in history was secured in 563 AD when St. Columba arrived on its white sandy beaches with 12 followers. He built his first Celtic Church and established a monastic community. Once settled, the Irish monk set about converting most of pagan Scotland and northern England to the Christian faith. Iona's fame as a missionary center and outstanding place of learning eventually spread throughout Europe, turning it into a place of pilgrimage for several centuries to come. It became a sacred isle where kings of Scotland, Ireland, and Norway were buried.

The original abbey was built from clay and wood. The Celtic Church diminished in size over the years to be replaced by the Roman Church. In 1203 a nunnery was established and the present day Benedictine Abbey was built. The Abbey became a victim of the Reformation and lay in ruins until 1899 when its restoration started.

It was a fascinating pilgrimage to Iona. A resident group of staff and volunteers share a year-round common life and maintain daily services in the Abbey. As welcomed guests, our group shared in all aspects of their life, including meal preparation and work tasks, as well as to explore issues of common concern, such as trade justice, the environment, peacemaking, and interfaith dialogue.

I had not set up high expectations for any sort of mystical mountain top experience, but nonetheless it happened. We were among a larger group that planned worship for one evening. As we were processing in, singing and holding candles..the intensity hit. I can still hear the howling winds outside which caused the huge wooden entry doors to creak. And the thoughts flowed in my mind of the many other pilgrims who had worshipped in that very space over the centuries. It was one of those “hair standing on end on the back of my neck” type of experiences. Thin places, indeed!

George Macleod, who organized the restoration of the Abbey way back when, said that the island of Iona was a thin place. He meant that the veil between the physical and the spiritual, the mortal and the immortal, was almost transparent in the intensity of the place and its religious history. He knew. And he more than anyone sparked in the twentieth century the first flame of spiritual passion with which the island was historically associated. In the book *Iona-A Sense of Beauty* it says, “Spirit still stands in this place. Long after walls have crumbled from worldly weariness, Truth is strong under this circle of sky.”

And so, my kindred in Christ, maybe we’ll never experience being enveloped by a light radiant cloud while standing on a mountaintop, but we *can* recognize the light within—the spirit of Christ’s love. And we can claim the altar of the holy right here in the midst of this broken world. Barbara Brown Taylor expands on the theme of encountering God in and through creation in her book *An Altar in the World*, a handbook that helps us to encounter God in the everyday experience of human life, here, in the midst of creation. She writes of God as “the More, the Really Real, the Luminous Web That Holds Everything in

Place.” Taylor remembers a time when people encountered God out in the world rather than limiting themselves to temples and churches, because they understood that they could encounter God anywhere. God was with them wherever they went, even though there were places, here and there, where God’s presence was keenly felt, if only for a moment. Doesn’t this remind us of Jesus, on the move from that mountain, headed to another one, where he would show us once again what God’s love looks like, but this time without light and without glory.

As we prepare to embark on our Lenten journey, how do we read and hear our Gospel text as a call to take what we have experienced out into the world? How do we integrate our glimpses of God’s love, our taste of God’s glory, into the everydayness of our lives? As Thomas Merton once said, “We are living in a world that is absolutely transparent, and God is shining through it all the time.”

Are we awake to what God is doing in the world, and in our lives, and in the life of this community of faith? Do we sense those moments of human communion, direct or indirect, with the holy and with one another? Is our transformation really a sudden thing, or a day-by-day, perhaps even hour-by-hour process?

How are we listening to the Stillspeaking God’s command to “listen to Jesus”? Moments—or even seasons—of transformation beckon us to new and meaningful encounters with God.

May we listen well—soak it all in and embrace it—and then go out. Come out, speak out, seek out, find out, and reach out!

Thanks be to God!