

Lent 2A The Transfiguration Of Our Lord Matthew 17:1-9

How much do we miss when we don't really look? I recently read an article called: "17 Things You Miss By Constantly Staring At Your Smartphone." No:1- this sermon-(look around!) 2) What silence sounds like. 3) Just how good that morning coffee tastes. 4) The smile of the happiest dog out for a walk. 5) Your thoughts, right now, in the present moment. 6) The red don't cross pedestrian sign. 7) A glance and a smile from a stranger. 8) The joy of a nice meal. 9) The punchline of a hilarious joke. 10) The ever changing beauty of the seasons. 11) The company of loved ones. 12) An unexpectedly talented street performer. 13) The pure joy of small children. 14) The glass door closed in front of you. 15) Someone telling you that they care. 16) The story your child has been dying to share with you all day. 17) The beauty of natural light- not what's emitted from your smartphone.

How much do we miss when we don't really look? Edgar Allan Poe explores that question in his short story, *The Purloined Letter*. As the story begins, two men are sitting in an apartment in Paris smoking their pipes and enjoying each other's company. They are not much for conversation; they go for an hour at a time without saying anything. One of the two men is the brilliant detective, Auguste Dupin, who had earlier solved the *Rue Morgue* murders. A police inspector drops by. Clearly agitated and anxious he confides in the two pipe smokers and seeks their help. A thief has stolen a letter from an aristocratic woman. The letter contains information that the woman must keep secret. If the thief were to expose the contents of the letter, the woman would be ruined. She knows who stole the letter because the thief took it right in front of her. She could not stop him because the person from whom she most wanted the contents of the letter hidden was also in the room when the thief pirated the letter. The woman has reported the incident to the police inspector and charged him with retrieving the letter without attracting too much attention. In desperation, the inspector has come to Dupin and his friend, the narrator of the story, to ask advice. The two men try to help, but the inspector has tried every suggestion they offer. He knows that the thief has hidden the letter somewhere in his own apartment. The inspector has the proper tools to enter the apartment when the thief is away. The methods of the inspector are meticulous. He has examined every brick in the yard of the man's apartment. He has poked needles into the upholstery. He has examined every stick of furniture with a microscope to look for the tiniest clue that indicates the letter might be hidden in a hollowed out chair back. He has looked behind mirrors and under carpets. He has turned each page of every book in the thief's private library. The inspector knows that the thief is playing with him, going out of the apartment frequently to give the inspector another chance to experience frustration. Despite looking in every possible hiding place, the inspector has come away empty-handed. Finally, Dupin and his friend have exhausted every suggestion. The inspector leaves with his shoulders drooping.

A month later, the inspector returns to the apartment of the two pipe smokers to see if they have come up with any new ideas. Dupin asks nonchalantly how much of a reward the inspector would offer for the recovery of the letter. He blurts out the sum of 50,000 francs. With that offer on the table, the brilliant detective replies to the effect that he would like that amount in a cheque! Astonished, the inspector writes a cheque for 50,000 francs. Dupin then unlocks a drawer and hands the precious letter to the inspector. At first, the inspector is speechless, but then he stumbles out the door in what Poe calls, "perfect agony of joy." Dupin's friend is as astounded as the inspector. Dupin then explains that he knew the character of the letter thief, and suspected what he had done with the letter. Under the pretence of a social call, Dupin had gone to his apartment. He had hired a man to fire off a musket at an agreed upon time. When the letter thief ran to the window to see what the commotion was about, Dupin retrieved the stolen letter, replacing it with a facsimile. The letter was where Dupin had spied it on a previous visit: right out in plain sight. The thief had marked the letter up a bit, torn the envelope, put a few smudges on it, so that it looked like an ordinary letter to the unobservant eye. Dupin

recognised that the letter looked too worn, too dirty, compared with the other articles in the plain card rack where the thief had kept the letter. The letter had been there the whole time, but the inspector didn't have eyes to see it.

Do Peter, James, and John have eyes to see God right in front of them? Peter, James, and John are the three insiders among Jesus' disciples. They were three of the first four whom Jesus called. The way St Matthew portrays it; they didn't hesitate to follow Jesus when he called (Matthew 4:18-22). All three were busy in the fishing industry when Jesus called, but all three dropped what they were doing to follow when Jesus called, seemingly out of the blue. They have seen and heard enough by this point that maybe the interruption in their careers has been worth the sacrifice. What they see now surpasses all of it.

Jesus leads the three of them up a high mountain. Just from making the climb they know something is about to happen. Surely, they were not prepared for what they saw. Jesus' face shone like the sun and his clothes turned dazzling white. Moses and Elijah turn up. Everything added up for Peter, James, and John. They may have been terrified, but everything added up. Jesus' face shone just as Moses' face had shone when he ascended Mount Sinai and spoke with God (Exodus 34). Moses and Elijah appearing on the mountain with Jesus meant that the law and the prophets were represented. Everyone expected Elijah to come back; he had been taken up into heaven. Even the cloud that surrounded the three startled disciples was a sign of God's presence. Here on this mountain, as terrified as they were, the three disciples saw all the evidence they needed that God was working through Jesus. God's presence could not have been more obvious.

God's presence is anything but obvious for most of us. Where is God in the brutality of war, or the corruption everywhere we look? Where is God when hurricanes and tsunamis wipe out hundreds of lives overnight? Where is God with all of the competing religions, each claiming to hold the truth? Where is God in the everyday dreariness of life? Where is God in our personal grief that never makes it to the headlines?

With all of the things that seem to deny God's existence, or at least our ability to see God, we might wish we could have an experience like Peter, James, and John had. If only God would appear to us in an unmistakable way, leaving no doubt that God was behind the experience. Even if this vision of God terrified us, it would be worth it, just to know God was there.

It didn't work that way for Peter, James, and John. This experience on the mountain did not take away the ambition of James and John. They and their mother wanted a special place in Jesus' glory (Matthew 20:20). Having seen Jesus all aglow didn't satisfy them. It didn't take away their hunger for recognition. We know about Peter. Even the transfiguration itself didn't heal his doubt. He cowered in denial at Jesus' arrest as though he had seen nothing (Matthew 26:69-74). For all of its dramatic power, the Transfiguration didn't redeem either the ambition of James and John, or the cowardice of Peter. Even the sight of the resurrected Jesus was not a foolproof experience for some of Jesus' followers. St Matthew tells us that some of the eleven disciples doubted, even on the mountain where Jesus spoke to them after the resurrection (Matthew 28:17).

The Transfiguration was a kind of sneak preview of Jesus' resurrection power. Only three of Jesus' disciples saw the Transfiguration. Even that viewing did not solve all of their problems, remove all of their doubts, or heal the insecurities that lead to ambition. As much as we might wish for a dramatic display of God's power and presence we will not receive one. We must build our faith on the evidence of God's presence that we have. We must look for God the way Dupin looked for the purloined letter.

We must look for God's presence in what appears to be something ordinary in plain sight. If we cannot understand how God is present in a world full of violence, maybe we can see God in the people of quiet courage who try to make peace in the midst of war, gang violence, and genocide. If we cannot find God in a world with hurricanes and tsunamis, maybe we can see God in the people who reach out in love to those who have lost everything. If we cannot find God in a world where children die of cancer, maybe we can see God in the courage those children often show. If we cannot see God because of our own individual pain, maybe we can find God in those who care for us and keep our hopes up. These experiences are not clear and unmistakable evidence of God among us, yet they can be a kind of transfiguration for us. In these experiences we can see God's grace and power shining through the darkness of the world.

All of us in this congregation pray that the church can become a kind of transfiguration. We hope that in our worship, in our service to the world, in our care for one another, we can reveal God more clearly to a world that is searching for God. Poe's inspector had nearly given up looking for the stolen letter. Just so, many have nearly given up hope of finding God. May this church reveal God to them. For those who cannot see God through the fog of their pain, may this church reveal God. For those who have known only a distorted view of God may this church reveal God. For those who think they have no need of God, who think they can get by without God, may this church reveal God. Let us reveal enough of God for people to begin their journey of faith. Let us go out into the world and be the transfiguration for others. Amen.

Fr Robert Newton