

Transfiguration Sunday

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Introduction

When fear or terror grips us it can be easy to become lost in familiar yet possibly fruitless practical tasks. We often don't know what to say or do. We may, like Peter, retreat to the 'known knows'. It can take courage to step into the space of the 'unknown unknowns'. And yet that is where our faith often takes us.

Text

Mark 9: 2-9

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.

Comment

There are some key phrases that stand out in this text. '**Six days later**' roots us directly in the ordinary stuff of life, a contrast to the '**transfigured**' and '**dazzling**' language of the next sentence which somehow takes us outside time. Six days also indicates 'just short of seven', the 'perfect' number of days of creation, emphasising that we are in-between kronos (linear time) and Kairos (God's time). Jesus' companions are the faithful disciples, '**Peter, James and John**', their ordinariness contrasting with the angelic visions of '**Elijah with Moses talking with Jesus.**' Throughout this passage we are being invited to notice the extraordinary mirroring the ordinary.

When I read this text through the lens of conflict transformation, however, then the stand-out phrase for me is '**...for they were terrified.**'

Our behaviours when we are afraid can sometimes take us by surprise.

Have you watched 'It's a Sin', a powerful drama telling the story of the AIDS pandemic of the 1980s and 1990s? There is one distressing scene when Valerie discovers the truth of her son's illness. In her shock, her terror, Valerie marches up and down the hospital corridor, desperately in denial, ricocheting between staff, relatives, friends and the dying, creating and re-creating practical (but worthless, and possibly destructive in this context) plans: anything to hide from the terrifying truth.

I've rarely been in extreme physical danger. I don't know what it's like to be in an abusive relationship, to live in a war zone, or to be a vulnerable child-refugee. But I do know what it is to be anxious, afraid, terrified even.

When I'm anxious or afraid I tend to go into overdrive. I can become tunnel-visioned, blinkered, only seeing what is right in front of me. My body is usually giving me clear signals that I'm in this state – I can feel my heart racing and sometimes I shake or shiver, my teeth perhaps even chattering.

These are natural responses to an overwhelming, or terrifying situation, and are part of the bodies 'protect' instinct. Responses to trauma are sometimes characterised as 'fight' or 'flight.'

In moments of extreme physical danger, to 'fight' would be to engage in any necessary action to defend myself from an aggressor, while the 'flight' response would be the instinctive decision to use any remaining energy I have to flee. There are other natural responses to overwhelming situations. The 'freeze', reaction is where our muscles become taut ready for that one single action for safety – ironically, this state of immobility may, like for the mouse or the rabbit, leave us extremely vulnerable. The 'fawn' instinct compels us to placate the aggressor, to submit to the situation. And the 'flop' response is an extreme bodily reaction when we may lose consciousness, collapse entirely, or where our muscles become floppy.

When exposed to terror, our body reaches for survival. Valerie went into extreme over-drive when faced with the potential loss of her son. Her terror and her denial led her to engage in extreme actions in the hope of defending herself. These are common dynamics in situations of terror. There are similar reactions when we face extreme disagreement or conflict.

In the story of the transfiguration, Peter's terror compels him to get practical. Peter, the builder, the organiser, the rock, plans on building his way out of the situation (you can almost visualise the spreadsheet emerging in front of him). In the face of terror, Peter 'fights' – he engages in familiar actions to prepare himself for survival.

And yet it is not a spreadsheet, but a voice – an inner voice perhaps, a wisdom – that emerges from the cloud that overshadows him, and James and John. This is an inner wisdom which the three disciples in their extreme ordinariness are, still, able to access. The ordinary sits alongside the extraordinary in extremis.

In Place for Hope we sometimes talk about the skills for conflict transformation as 'enhanced common sense.' When I see a white light of fear flash in front of me, sometimes I need to count to ten. When I am incensed by what I hear someone else say, sometimes I need to reach for a clarifying question. When I find myself over-talking, sometimes I need to be silent, to listen.

And in the terror – the voice. And in the stramash – the stillness.

Trusting that God will speak to us in the midst of our terror, and that we, the bystander, the ordinary one, will be the one to receive insight, is a tall and yet liberating order. God says to us: 'Look, this is my beloved. Listen.' How we respond is a matter of life and death.

Response

When have you been afraid?

When you are afraid, what is your most common instinctive reaction?

What practices help you overcome fear?

Watch 'It's a Sin.'

Prayer

Loving God
of the storm and the stramash,
in times of terror,
steady our beating hearts;
still our racing thoughts;
calm our fears
so that what is terrifying or fearful
but may be caught up
in your divine stillness,
and so transformed.

In the name of the
dearly Beloved,
your Son,
we pray,
Amen