

The Transfiguration of the Lord
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Personal encounters have a way of touching us and changing us that are profound and powerful. Think about meeting someone for the first time and having that be the beginning of falling in love. That encounter can change a person's life forever. Think of looking into the face of your newborn child for the first time. With that encounter you fall in love in a different, but no less life-changing way.

In these two examples of encounter we not only learn something about the other that attracts us, but we are also shaped and changed ourselves by this person and our encounter with them.

One way to see this Feast of the Transfiguration of the Lord is as a celebration of encounter. The encounter with Jesus that Peter, James and John have on the mountain helps them to see more clearly than ever who Jesus really is. As Jesus converses with Elijah and Moses, the light goes on for them - literally, as they see the face of Jesus shining like the sun and his clothes white as light.

This encounter changes not only their perception of Jesus but also changes them. That is the witness we hear in the Second Letter of Peter today. The witness is grounded in this experience on the mountain - not in some made up myth, but in a real encounter.

Here on the holy mountain the vision of Daniel that we heard described in the first reading is fulfilled. In that vision Daniel sees the throne of God the Father being set up, and the Ancient One taking his place on the throne. Then one like a Son of man comes and receives "dominion, glory and kingship."

Daniel's vision is a vision of God's victory over the dark powers that Israel suffers under. God is in control, even if for now evil seems to have the upper hand. God will triumph.

Some two hundred years before the coming of Jesus, the prophet envisions the coming of one whose dominion is everlasting, and whose kingship will never be destroyed. On the mountain Peter, James and John see this vision fulfilled in Jesus.

Just a few verses before this passage, Peter has confessed his belief in Jesus as "the Messiah, the Son of the living God" (Matt. 16:16).

That confession leads to Jesus declaring Peter as the rock upon whom he will build his church. But Peter will still need time to grasp the whole picture. He still carries lots of expectations about what it means for Jesus to be “Messiah.” And we learn just a few verses later that Peter has it very wrong. He doesn’t understand the cross and so rejects Jesus’ prediction that he will go to Jerusalem and be killed.

When we fall in love with someone we inevitably begin to idealize that person and overlook, or not even see, who they really are, but who we need them to be for us. For the love to grow and mature we will have to encounter our beloved again and again, learning to love them for who they really are, and not our idealized version of them.

For those of you who are married, or those of us who have deep and long-lasting friendships, we know that this movement from an idealized version of the other to the real other can sometimes be very painful.

For parents looking into the face of their newborn for the first time, and falling in love with the miracle that their child is, they will have their love mature in the years ahead as they navigate the challenges and heartaches that inevitably come to every parent.

For Peter and the other disciples, their love for Jesus and their understanding of who he is has to grow and mature as their time with him continues to unfold. The mountain top experience again affirms their joy that Peter declared at Caesarea Philippi. That joy had been dashed almost as soon as it was expressed when Jesus’ vision of messiah included suffering and death.

Now they are brought to the heights again. Here is Jesus, conversing with Moses and Elijah. He indeed is the long-awaited prophet. Peter wants to do what is natural, what is rooted in their tradition of the Feast of Booths, and erect tents or booths to honor these three giants of their faith that now includes Jesus.

Every year the Jewish people erect tents or booths during the Feast of Tabernacles to remember how God cared for their ancestors as they wandered in the desert. Peter’s instinct is deeply rooted in this awe-inspiring encounter with the God who has always cared for them, and who now declares that Jesus is his Beloved Son in whom he is well pleased.

But just like his instinct around Jesus as Messiah, his understanding is not mature yet. His love and commitment is not quite ready for prime time. They still have to go down the mountain and encounter the cross.

There will be more dark days ahead and Peter's faith, and the faith of the other disciples, will be sternly and painfully tested. Peter will deny even knowing Jesus and most of the others will flee.

But once again it will be a personal encounter that will change them, and this time for good. In the appearances of the Risen Jesus, all the disciples get their mountain top experience. The victorious vision of Daniel will be fulfilled beyond their wildest dreams, and the Transfiguration experience will be understood as a foretaste of what they now enjoy.

For you and me, disciples of the Lord in the twenty-first century, the challenges of two millennia ago are still our challenges. Just as the love of husbands and wives, friends and parents has to mature with each encounter with the one we love, so too we have to be willing to let our encounters with Christ mature our love for him.

We have to admit that we can sometimes have that immature love that demands God be the God we want him to be - who fulfills our needs as we perceive them - the one who cures our illness, solves our financial stresses, takes care of finding us a spouse or a friend or direction in our lives. And when God doesn't come through in the way we want, slowly and almost imperceptibly in the midst of our pain and disappointment (if we are open to the encounter), Jesus will show us the way to a deeper, and a more mature love of God.

In his 2005 Encyclical Letter, "God is Love," Pope Benedict XVI wrote that "Being Christian is not the result of an ethical choice or a lofty idea, but the encounter with an event, a person, which gives life a new horizon and a decisive direction" (#1).

Pope Francis quotes from this passage from Pope Benedict in his Apostolic Exhortation, "The Joy of the Gospel," and goes on to say that "thanks solely to this encounter - or renewed encounter - with God's love, which blossoms into an enriching friendship, we are liberated from our narrowness and self-absorption. We become fully human when we let God bring us beyond ourselves in order to attain the fullest truth of our being" (#8).

Just like the first moments of love or friendship can bring us beyond ourselves in a mountain top experience, so too our encounters with the Lord can take us to heights of joy and fulfillment that can sustain us through the crosses of our lives.

If we allow ourselves to encounter Jesus, through intentional time set aside for prayer and reflection, and a regular recalling of our mountain top experiences, then they will be lamps that will shine through the dark places in our lives until, as Second Peter says, ‘the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts.’”

Yes, this feast day is about encounter with Jesus. And now we turn to this sacred altar where we encounter the Beloved Son in the most profound way as he gives himself to us in his very Body and Blood.

May our communion with him and with each other today bring us to the mountain top and then send us from here to shine his light to all we encounter.