

Last Epiphany A: Matthew 17.1-9  
February 15, 2026  
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Galway Kinnell once wrote,

Whatever happens. Whatever  
what *is* is is what  
I want. Only that. But that.

Do you know what he means? I mean, sometimes I don't. Sometimes I don't want what's happening to be what's happening. But I do believe deeper down that it really is better to be present to my life as it is than to live in a state of denial or wishful thinking.

The story of the Transfiguration is a difficult story to know what to do with. At least it is for this preacher. We read the story of Moses at Sinai and can see that Jesus seems to be stepping into the line of prophets who come after him. But Moses came back with the tablets of the Law. He'd gone up the mountain to get something from the hand of God. What were the project deliverables, if you will, for the Transfiguration? Moses and Elijah are there, and we're told that they have a conversation with Jesus, but no transcript is provided. Even if Peter, James, and John overheard it, Jesus told them to keep quiet about the experience until after he's been raised from the dead.

There are a number of times in the gospels when Jesus tells his disciples not to tell anyone about what they've seen or even not to tell anyone what they know about who he is. Have you ever wondered about what this might be about? Why keep something wonderful that you've experienced all to yourself? Especially about Jesus. Aren't we supposed to be out there spreading the good news?

Apparently not always. Apparently sometimes we're supposed to stop the little machine in our skulls that's incessantly asking us, "Well, what might this mean? And what are you going to do about it? Don't you think it's about time we made a plan?" I don't know about your brain, but mine runs off after these questions in about the first second and a half after I experience something. And in that sliver of time it will also probably have wondered whether the milk's getting low and remembered that I really need to get the back door rekeyed. I should probably write that down, actually. Wait. What just happened?

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Recently we were at dinner with some friends. It shouldn't surprise you that I can't remember how the conversation led to Ardelle sharing her occasional need to say, "Scott, I need you to stop what you're doing and look at me. I need to make sure you hear this." And then she tells me that the milk has gotten low or that I need to get the back door rekeyed. I wish it were ridiculous that she would ever do such a thing, but it's not. My mind jumps

from whatever *is* is, to what might be coming next. Or even just to an explanation or an interpretation of what it all might mean.

Maybe before the Transfiguration means anything else, it just stops the story, and hopefully us, in our tracks. Peter is my kind of guy. Unfortunately. As soon as the other two prophets appear and Jesus's face starts shining like the sun, he says, "Wow! Isn't this great! Hey, why don't we make three dwellings, one for each of you..." Peter and I are that guy who breaks the spell of a magical moment by saying, "Hey isn't this great what's happening right now? Let's capture it in a selfie!" The text says Peter was still speaking, still filling up the experience of transfiguration with commentary and plan-making when God, sounding a little like Ardelle, come to think of it, says loudly enough to shut him up, "This is my Son, the Beloved. Could you please stop making plans for a new subdivision, Peter, and listen to him!"

Stopping the urge to comment, or to explain, or to begin mapping out a response are really just what it means to pay attention, are they not? When Jesus says, "Don't tell anyone about this. At least not yet..." might this also be a way of telling people to stay present and attentive to what's actually happening or to the person who's actually standing right in front of them, before they run off to announce what they think it all means?

If this is the case, I wonder if it's also not unrelated to the way Jesus kept telling us not to judge. Because judgment is another all too common way, at least for this sinner, to leave the present moment behind. To stop paying attention. My judgment shuts down any openness to or curiosity about what may actually be happening with the certainty that I already know what's going on. Even the innocent declaration, "Lord, it is good for us to be here," pulls me out of the experience of being here. And, unfortunately, my judgments are too often much less charitable than Peter's. I know just who you are because I saw what you posted or heard what you did or know what newspaper you read or where you go to church or ... fill in the blank. Maybe "Do not judge," has something very much in common with, "Don't tell anyone about this. Not yet. Sit still with it a little longer. Listen..." These are just a few of the ways Jesus calls us back to our lives.

The good news is that since Jesus is the one who calls us, we know it's only because he loves us. So, there must be something good or beautiful or true in this moment that he does not want us to miss. When God says, "This is my beloved. Listen to him." it's an invitation, not a threat. And here's the best news of all. The same Jesus who was transfigured so magnificently that day taught us that the ones God calls beloved and even speaks through are not limited to a few famous prophets on a mountain a long time ago. Jesus said God's beloved ones are all around us wherever we are, every day, if only we're given eyes to see our human sisters and brothers as the bearers of God's image that they truly are. If we're only given ears to hear what God has to say to us through their lives.

Whom might God be calling you away from your plans and your distractions to listen to? To give your attention to? Whom might Jesus be telling you to pause your explanations of and your judgments toward and be open to the gift God is sending you in the form of this friend, this stranger, maybe even this enemy? What might it look like to see this gifted, beloved world for what it is in the eyes of God, even for a moment?

I'll leave you with an experience the Trappist monk Thomas Merton once had, not in his monastery, but on a sidewalk in Louisville. Perhaps you've heard it before, maybe even from me. But it strikes me today as a vision of what we might be missing when we give our attention to anything other than what truly is.

At the corner of Fourth and Walnut, in the center of the shopping district, I was suddenly overwhelmed with the realization that I loved all those people, that they were mine and I theirs, that we could not be alien to one another even though we were total strangers. It was like waking from a dream of separateness, of spurious self-isolation in a special world, the world of renunciation and supposed holiness. The whole illusion of a separate holy existence is a dream... If only everybody could realize this! But it cannot be explained. There is no way of telling people that they are all walking around shining like the sun...

Friends, maybe that's transfiguration too. It's not just the mystery of God or the person of Jesus that our judgments and explanations keep us from encountering in the present. You are a shining and elusive mystery too, as is the total stranger you walked past on your way to church. Perhaps there is no way of telling people this. But imagine what might change in us and in this world us if we could wake from this dream of separateness we live in ... if we could just stop and look and listen and love, long enough to realize that it wasn't just Jesus on a mountain one day who was transfigured. We are all walking around every day in every place with faces that shine like the sun.