

## 2 Peter 1:16-21

*I was away for Transfiguration Sunday. But I had the good fortune to hear an excellent sermon preached by a colleague which I have posted here.*

### Until the Day Dawns

Transfiguration Sunday  
February 3, 2008  
Ryerson United Church  
Vancouver, BC

The Rev. Debra Bowman

Read the passage: [The Message](#) or [The New Revised Standard Version \(NRSV\)](#).

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When I was 16 I went to live in Argentina for a year. It was a transformative time and I was open to it all: to the departure from what was familiar, to new culture and friends and language. Even to the shadows of an encroaching time of terror, as I was there just as rumours of the dirty war were beginning to be whispered in living rooms and coffee shops.

Towards the end of the year I traveled with two other women to a town called Bariloche. It is in the south of Argentina, nestled in the foothills of the Andes, and to get there we took the train across the Patagonia. Bariloche at the time was a bit like Banff, resonant of home for me and my friend from Seattle. One day we set out to climb a mountain called Cerro Lopez. As we waited for the bus that would take us to the trail head we met four young men from Buenos Aires, cuatro caballeros, or the four cowboys we came to call them. The seven of us climbed into the bus and eventually up to the top of the mountain. It was an enchanted day, in a perfect year. An experience of wonder and privilege, of adventure and unlimited potential.

That night we stayed in a refuge on the summit, in bunk rooms separated for women and men. Sometime during the deep darkness I was woken up by a bright glow coming in through the window. I thought for a moment that a street light was shining into our room, but then remembered that we were on a mountaintop, with no electricity. I got out of bed and went to the window and there, through the warped glass I saw an enormous comet. It seemed to be stalled in its progress over the mountain, hanging in the sky like a prop for a Christmas pageant.

There I was, at the metaphorical and literal summit of my year, accompanied by friends, surrounded by the beauty of a new country, and bathed in the light of a comet. And I heard the voice of God declaring, "Anything you can do, I can do better."

I wasn't a believer in those days. Although I'd grown up in the United Church, I left with the great exodus at about age 13. I had confused belief in God with belief in organized religion, and being of the Marxist thought that religion was the opiate of the masses, I threw God out with that particular bathwater. And then, on that mountain top, on a day that came very near to perfect, I had an experience of being bathed in the light of God, a moment when God offered witness to me that there is a wonder that exists beyond all human ability to create. I was forced to acknowledge that God existed, and that indeed the space between God and I in that moment was so thin there was almost no space at all.

In the years after, when I returned to church I was struck by how many people had had similar experiences. In discussion groups and Bible studies when the ministers would ask people to reflect on

their mountaintop experiences, I was shocked at how many others had also encountered the presence of God on the top of a mountain. I was amazed at how many fit outdoor people there are in the United Church. So many hikers and climbers. It took me years, well into my studies at seminary to realize that they were speaking metaphorically. They weren't actually talking about times they'd been hiking and found God, but rather they were referring to the transfiguration stories. They were making connections to the Biblical passages that tell of Jesus being on top of a mountain, lit up in the glory of God and his friends recognizing that they were in the presence of the holy.

In our reading today the writer of 2 Peter is addressing people who have doubts about the gospel, and in particular perhaps are skeptical about the second coming. It appears to the doubters that nothing in the world has changed, and they are referring to some of the faith stories as 'cleverly devised myths' or fables. The letter is not actually written by Peter, but by someone speaking in his voice. In order to gain authenticity, the author reminds the recipients of the letter that he, John and James were with Jesus on the mountaintop. They were with him when he was bathed in the light and the glory of God. They were with him when God's voice spoke from the heavens and declared Jesus to be the son of God, the beloved of God, in whom God was well pleased. There, high above the crowds that adored him and far removed from the authorities that are beginning to threaten his life, "...[Jesus] was transfigured before them, and his clothes became dazzling white, such as no one on earth could bleach them." (Mark 9:2-3)

They were eyewitnesses to the transfiguration of Jesus, when he was transformed from the figure of a dusty, sandal-footed flesh and blood mortal into the presence of the most holy, heralded by glorious light. Those witnessing this sight realized, perhaps more profoundly than ever before, that Jesus was no ordinary person, but a person of God, perhaps the person of God, the divine in skin. He was transfigured, and they are transformed. And so, because they had been eyewitnesses to the transfiguration, they know the gospel to be true.

Peter is arguing that the faith tradition of the early believers is not a collection of 'cleverly devised myths,' but is based on the experience of eyewitnesses. The misleading myths are ones spread by false prophets who, he writes, "... arose among the people, just as there will be false teachers among you, who will secretly bring in destructive opinions. They will even deny the Master who bought them-bringing swift destruction on themselves. ... And in their greed they will exploit you with deceptive words." (2 Peter 2:1-3)

There are certainly still false prophets amongst us. The other day my friend was telling me that her son has been corresponding with a minister who has been sending him writings and vials of holy water and most recently some muddy coloured liquid that he was supposed to drink. I saw another myth in the Globe and Mail yesterday. Below a picture of a despondent looking man was this text: "On February 3, millions of men across Canada will be left out. Feeling alone. Feeling ashamed. Out there, suffering in silence." Why this misery you might ask? "Because they won't be watching the super bowl in high definition." "There is a way out," the ad assures us, "they can buy a Samsung HDTV." The last line of the ad reads: "There is hope after all." (Globe and Mail, Feb. 2, 2008) This is what the writer of 2 Peter would refer to as a cleverly devised myth.

In contrast, truth bearing myths help us to speak of a reality that is beyond speech, beyond our imagination's ability to find adequate language or image. Madeleine L'Engle has written that "The brilliance of God is indeed blinding, and we need myth, story, to help us bear the light." (L'Engle, *The Mythical Bible*, Jan 6, 1991 in *Text this Week*) When we are tempted to minimize or diminish Scripture by saying it is 'just' a myth or 'only' a metaphor we trivialize those moments on the mountaintop that many of us have experienced. Moments that might seem ordinary, but indeed hold the power and the truth of the presence of God. Moments when our hearts stop and we are blinded by the brilliance of the holy right in front of us.

Yesterday I went for a walk and I stopped along the sea shore and watched the water and listened to those little black birds with the white circles around their eyes as they floated and dove and talked to one another and I smelled the air, just as the wind died down and just before the snow started, and my heart

stopped and I knew I was on holy ground. I knew that there was not a division between heaven and earth but that the two had met and Christ had given me the eyes to see it.

Sometimes the moment is not so tranquil: a moment in the kitchen surrounded by children getting ready for school, listening to the giggling and the arguing, mopping up the cheerios and nagging for them to get ready and seeing suddenly, suddenly, that in the midst of all this chaos is also the holy. This is my life and God has blessed my life and made it holy and there is no space in this very moment between heaven and earth.

Maybe it is during a particular piece of music that you have that moment, or on a favorite hike, or at a dinner table with beloved friends, or over a solitary cup of tea. In those moments, what takes our breath away and illuminates the moment is a deep awareness that God has drawn near, the kingdom of God has come very close.

There is another place besides the mountaintop where people have been led to believe that they can encounter this moment, where they can expect to see on occasion the brilliance that indicates the presence of God. It is the church. The church is to be the body of Christ. It is to be the place where the divine and the earthly come together and people may be blinded by the hope and the holy that they encounter here. A colleague told me once that we don't speak much about this expectation of the Christian community because we don't want to be held accountable for being that extraordinary. We don't want to be held accountable for the task of being dazzling. But that is our gift and our calling – to be the Body of Christ in the world. To on occasions be blindingly brilliant in how we live as the Body of Christ. To let our lives and our language be reflections of the glory of God, made visible in the life and resurrection of Christ. We allow ourselves to be brilliant in our faith and in our service so that people can be aware, as were Jesus' friends on that mountain top that here, here is something special. Here the distance between heaven and earth is diminished.

I have had opportunities to see that brilliance in you. When I see how you welcome the stranger, and how you care for each other. When I see how you nurse along these old buildings so that they are available not just for the church but for the community. When I listen to stories of the pastoral visitors about the connections they maintain with shut ins. When members of the Disciple bible study share concerns and prayers with each other. When you gather to make soup, when you unpack and repack volumes of thrift items. I saw it when Rachel offered to bring Chinese dumplings to the Shrove Tuesday dinner, and then offered to teach us how to make them. I saw it in the little girl I greeted before the service last week who told me "I'm new here." She said she was new the week before, and went to Sunday School and so enjoyed herself that she'd come back and brought her cousin this time. It's not only brilliant that they came on their own, but it's also brilliant that you have organized and offered a children's programme that draws children back again.

There is a brilliance that indicates God is present in Christ, and Christ is present in the body that is the church. One of you wrote to me "...one reason I want to remain part of a faith community –[is that within the community] the stuff of life is enveloped within a much larger context of meaning, connectedness, and joy." That is the writing of someone transfigured by the glory of God, and who sees that glory in this place.

There are times in our lives when we are witnesses to the glory of God, when we see the brilliant light of Christ in our presence. When we offer stories of those times, or indeed when we are that light for each other, then we are 'as to a lamp shining in a dark place' lighting the way for each other until 'the day dawns and the morning star rises in [our hearts].' May we be blessed by these moments, held in faith and encouraged by each other and the presence of Christ in our midst. Amen

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