

February 22, 2009
Anita Rediger

In The Face of Jesus

The changing of the seasons is marked in many ways. As summer nears, fireflies flit about, their bioluminescence on exhibit. Fall's arrival can first be anticipated as the leaves of the cottonwood trees begin to show hints of shimmering yellow. Winter slips in as a quiet, dark season with only a few hours of sunlight. And then comes Spring! Spring! With an earthy, moist smell and the emergence of radiant forsythia on bare, twiggy branches.

As different as these harbingers of the changing seasons may be, there is one constant. Somewhere, sometime, in the heart of each season, *something* happens. It isn't captured or anticipated by the calendar, but all of a sudden it happens. It's the light! All of a sudden the shadows have a different slant and the colors a startling hue.

Just in these past few days, there have been moments that have prompted this wonderful sense of anticipation. The pattern of the sunrise, the way the sunlight glances off of the barn roof, the cast of the afternoon light as it filters through the woods...for brief moments here in late winter we glimpse of Spring. And it's the light that stirs our souls. It's the light that awakens our senses to the possibility of change. It's the light which catches our eye, inviting us to look more closely. It's the light which invites us to look around inquisitively and with expectation.

What is it that we are looking for? We don't know for sure, but we recognize that in this new light everything looks different. Things around us don't only look different; we sense that change is coming and that everything *will be* different.

Now, we join with the Peter, James and John as they make their way up the high mountain with Jesus. Six days ago, Jesus had brought a startling word to his followers. And at what a time! Things were just really beginning to take off, to gain speed, to generate energy and excitement. Up until now, Jesus had been preaching, healing and doing "mighty works." But then, six days ago, Jesus put everything in a different light with arcane words about his future. He talked of suffering, of rejection and he said that he would be killed. These were harsh, hurtful, frightful words. But then, he spoke of life, a life rising from all of this. (reading from Mark 8: 31-33, 9:1)

Peter – hey, he liked how things were going, so he as much as told Jesus “don't say such things; it will ruin everything!” In return, Peter received a jolting response from Jesus – one that would have certainly sent me into a tailspin! Jesus challenged Peter to take a hard look at his ways of seeing things (his expectations, his script) – pointedly noting that Peter was focused on things that were not of the Kingdom of God. In contrast, Jesus

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promised the disciples and the crowds a new Kingdom, the Kingdom which he came proclaiming, one which they *could see* – in their lifetimes – if they only *would see*...

In today's text, we find ourselves "six days later." Jesus, together with Peter, James and John, leave the other disciples behind them and hike the trail up a high mountain, apart and by themselves. Apart and by themselves, in unfamiliar territory, Jesus was suddenly transfigured before them. Their Jesus, the one they knew "so well." Their Jesus – the one who was doing all the right things – promising the coming of the kingdom which they had been waiting for, calling his recruits and doing "mighty works." Their Jesus, the one that they were counting on -that is until that unsettling conversation just six days ago – metamorphosed before them. Jesus – in many ways so very much the same, yet now also so very different. "His clothes became dazzling white, such as no one on earth could bleach them." His clothes whiter than any launderer could wash them... Jesus was transformed before them and Peter, James and John wouldn't ever be able to see him the same way again...this experience put everything "in a different light." Apart and by themselves, others appeared. Moses and Elijah were present– talking with Jesus. Now, what to think, what to do? How to enter into this experience? How to make sense of what was happening?

Who knows exactly what it was that sparked the thought that came to Peter. But it was a good one, a fitting one. In the moment of this disorientating, holy encounter, Peter's entire lifetime as a Jewish man gave him bearing, a frame of reference. He would make booths for these revered ones, just like at the Festival of the Booths: the building of booths – a celebration for the observance of the history of the people of Israel. The Festival of the Booths was a time of living in tents and retelling the great stories of salvation as a pilgrim people – telling of God's deliverance out of Egypt and faithfulness in the wilderness, and the ever-beckoning challenge of the prophets. As Moses and Elijah talk with Jesus, Peter recognizes in a new way Jesus' part of this great salvation story. The stories of the past...leading into the future...certainly, an incredibly eye-opening moment - but not a moment which could be captured or contained in the booths of the past.

Peter saw in this moment a snapshot of the wilderness –yes, but also felt bewilderment as he considered the future. He saw a glimpse of prophetic promise, but now with renewed sense of provocation. Peter felt the hope of liberation and salvation, but puzzled at Jesus' words of sacrifice and servanthood. Overwhelmed by this new insight, the disciples weren't simply out of their comfort zone; they were terrified!

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Then it was over, the light changed and there they were - apart and by themselves, once again, just with Jesus - *but not as they had been before.*

The Word became flesh – not to be captured or contained just for this time on the mountain top, but rather as a mirage which would quiver beside them and beyond them - drawing them down the steep grade and into the crowds. The Light of Christ in the face of Jesus.

As the Emmaus Road Mennonite Fellowship, we've been traveling together for 18 months or so. How many times have we found ourselves bewildered and puzzled? Yet, like the first disciples of Jesus, have we not felt the irresistible stirrings of a beckoning, prophetic call? A call which has at its core – a genuine love “which rejoices in hope, is patient in suffering, perseverant in prayer, generous in giving, hospitable to strangers, and nonresistant to enemies.”¹ How many times have our expectations, our bent to categorization of self and other been tested, our understandings stretched beyond our zones of comfort. But in this time of growing understanding of the call of the Kingdom, are we not finding ourselves wonderfully transformed?

As we journey with our dear brothers and sisters at First Mennonite, we do find ourselves, just like Peter, looking through the lens of history – and that's OK. That's what we have; that's what we know...and at the same time, Jesus opens us to new ways of seeing. Jesus invites us to “see that the Kingdom of God has come with power,” the power of sacrificial love. Mark 9:1

The transfiguration of Jesus – from a mighty, militant warrior-messiah into a humble, gentle man, with love so profound that it was expressed in willingness to face death – even death on a cross - challenged the understanding of Peter, James and John. All the way down the mountain they wrestled with insights that they could no longer deny. This mountain top experience *insisted* that they see Jesus anew. Jesus was not the man they had thought he was. Jesus was not who they wanted him to be. Jesus was the Beloved of God...and in order to fathom that at all they were challenged to “listen to him.” In other words, this voice from the clouds says, “surrender your previous expectations, sharpen your senses, attune your ear...pay attention...and be transformed...”

The transfiguration of Jesus – from a mighty, militant messiah into a humble, gentle man, with love so profound that it was expressed in its willingness to face death – even death on a cross - startles and confounds *us*. As we come to “see” *this Jesus*, we, too, are

¹ Biesecker-Mast, Gerald . “Recovering the Anabaptist Body.” In *Anabaptists and Postmodernity*, Edited by Gerald & Susan Biesecker-Mast. (Scottsdale, PA: Pandora Press, 2000), 199.

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transformed. We must be! This transfiguration of the Jesus from one whom we thought we knew requires a transfiguration (metamorphism) of *our faith*. What if we would “surrender our historical expectations and presuppositions, sharpen our senses, attune our ears...and pay attention...” Might it be that we could, that we would see Jesus again, as if for the first time? That is...would we, too, be transformed?

How could this be...how would this be? What does it look like? I certainly can't tell you! That's the wonderful delight of transformative encounters! We don't plan them! Yet, as we share our stories together, we'll be drawn to the “visible witness,” the “visible and defenseless discipleship”² in the life-giving Body of Christ. We'll know it when we see it!

“as we are joined to Christ we become transformed and live our lives according to another logic...in Christ we are not just pardoned but are also healed of our sin and we [are invited to become] a different kind of people, a new creation, who live by a different logic. We love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us. We forgive, as we have been forgiven. We renounce violence as a means of defending or securing or saving ourselves or those we love.”³

Where does this transformation take place? Where ever we find ourselves – on the holy ground of daily existence.

- In our meeting for worship –right now
- In our fellowship forum – following worship tonight
- In the classroom tomorrow morning
- Alone – in the middle of the night
- Between neighbors downtown
- Behind the closed doors of our very own homes...
- In our contacts and encounters with those of other faith communities.

In his encounter on the mountaintop Peter simply applied what was familiar to him from the matrix of his life. He needed to “make sense” of what was taking place in front of him. Our “gut reactions,” our spontaneous responses to events that stretch our faith, also come out of the place of past experience. That's fine... that is... that's a fine place from which to grow and to go! Jesus invited Peter to see him in a new light. The invitation is ours, as well. We're invited to the mountaintop; we invited to return with new

² Ibid.

³ Bell, Daniel, “God Does Not Demand Blood” Christian Century, (Feb. 10, 2009): 22.

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understandings to the reality of life... to meet up with others so as to walk in newness of life together.

Brothers and sisters, followers in the way of Jesus: the Spirit of Christ enlivens and enlightens us...predictably with constancy like the rising and the setting of the sun.

Brothers and sisters, fellow travelers on the road of life: the Spirit of Christ enlivens and enlightens us ...unpredictably with beauty and wonder as surprising and spontaneous as the burst of transforming light across the fields in late winter –

The Light of Christ breaks into our lives – unpredictable in its timing, but with promise to make all things new Thanks be to God...the transforming Light of Christ... changes us, it changes everything!