

Seeing and knowing (Luke 9:28-43a)

The thing Peter needs is right there in front of him.

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Sometimes you send children to retrieve something and, after a cursory glance in the general area, they proclaim that they “can’t find it anywhere.” Invariably, the grownup goes to the same room/drawer/shelf and finds the very thing they sent the child to get. When I was a child, my mom, frustrated by my lack of observation, would say, “If it had been a snake, it would have bitten you!” (Attribute that to her grandmother’s sharecropper upbringing in Georgia—my mother has never seen a snake in the wild.)

On Transfiguration Sunday, and during the Epiphany season, something exists right alongside people who are completely unaware of it. But that “something” is not meant to stay obscured. And even as it revealed, even when we think we know what it is, there is more to it than we anticipated.

I am struck by the fact that, before Peter witnesses the transfiguration of Jesus, he has already made an important declaration about who Jesus is. Jesus asks his disciples who people say he is and then turns the question to them: “But who do you say that I am?” It is then that Peter declares that Jesus is the Messiah. Yet here we see him at Jesus’ transfiguration with tons of words and ideas but no apparent inclination to do what is required of him: to listen.

In my work, I do a lot of teaching. I train good Christians to prayerfully be better and more just in their relationships. What almost always happens, no matter who I'm training, is that there will be a handful of people who are super talkative and eager to share what *they* know.

To be honest, when the tables are turned, I'm often that student myself. But in those moments I am reminded that there is a difference between knowing about something and really knowing it. When I learned to drive, the state first had me read a handbook on how to do it properly. But I didn't really know how to drive until I felt the power of the machine in my hands and under my feet, until I learned just what happens when I press the brake pedal too hard or turn the steering wheel too quickly. I couldn't get my license by simply knowing about driving.

One of the most important spiritual lessons I learned in seminary was that studying theology, while important, is not the same as the worship of God. When we know about something, it remains theoretical. When we know something, it moves to praxis. We act upon it.

In my tradition, we have a ton of words to verbalize who Jesus is. I'm grateful for those words because they provide us with important frameworks for who we should be in the world. But a framework merely supports a more complex and robust structure. We give frameworks purpose and usefulness by what we do with them. Everything Peter knows—everything he could ever suggest about Jesus, God, or the prophets—can only be secondary to how he lives into his realizations. Everything he says and sees will be meaningless if he can't listen and act upon what he hears.

The thing he needs is right there in front of him. He just has to pay attention to it.

The gift of Transfiguration Sunday is that it invites us to stop, look, and listen. It encourages us to pay specific attention to the very thing we may be overlooking. And then it charges us, after we've retrieved the thing, to take it and use it.