

Bearing Beams of Love

This past week, while I was on study leave, I spent four days at one of my favorite retreat places, Emery House, in West Newbury, Massachusetts. Emery House is the country home of the Society of Saint John the Evangelist, an Episcopal monastic order based in Cambridge, MA. The brothers offer the hospitality of retreat, and they do all they can to support retreatants in finding rest and restoration. I studied and prayed in my light-filled little hermitage, walked up the hill to the Emery House chapel, for the daily noon Eucharist and Evening Prayer, and ate delicious meals with the brothers and other guests—meals taken in silence with classical music playing softly in the background. Emery House is on the south bank of the Merrimack River, and each day I went out on my cross-country skis, winding my way through the woods and across the open fields by the river, enjoying the quiet and the beauty all around me. It was a blessed time.

While I was on retreat, I decided that I would fast from news and the internet. Part of what I needed, in my time away, was to relax from being so tightly wound by all that has been happening in Washington, and around the country, in recent weeks. Of course, as soon as I got home, the world, and its concerns, came rushing back. In no time at all, I was getting all wound up again, even though I had made a promise to myself, before I left Emery House, to be more faithful in doing the practices that help me to find the quiet center during times of great stress. And then Jeff sent me his sermon from last Sunday. It was a great big forehead slap of a reminder—about letting go of anxiety, of trusting in God, of living a life focused on love. Thanks Jeff, I needed that!

I think that my time at Emery House had a lot in common with what the disciples experienced when they went up the mountain with Jesus. Jesus took them to a place far removed from the stress of the crowds who came to him for teaching and healing. And in that place apart, they experienced a theophany, a glimpse of God, a vision of Jesus shining like the sun. But what if it wasn't Jesus who was changed, or transfigured, on that mountaintop, as much as it was the disciples' ability to *see Jesus as he really was*, that was changed, or transfigured? As Trevor Dennis writes, in *Imagining God*,

Jesus was no different on that Mount of Transfiguration. There was no changing room on the summit. He did not put on the glory of God. What changed was what his friends there saw, and felt, and understood. So it is with the holy. Stripped of our pretensions, and of our striving, away from our cleverness, we suddenly see things as they are . . .

I wonder if, in order to *see things as they are*—this transfiguration of our seeing, and feeling, and understanding—we need to find some version of the mountaintop—a time and place to be apart with God. In a booklet on Transfiguration, Brother Geoffrey Tristram, Superior of the Society of Saint John the Evangelist, writes,

It is good for us to seek out sacred places, places where God seems quite close, since our world often seems increasingly frenetic and complex. It can feel unsafe and even hostile. We seek out places where we may go to be ‘held’: held by the physical stone and bricks, held by prayer; held by the beauty of worship and the power of silence. We seek out places where it is safe to bring our pain and suffering, safe to open ourselves up to God and allow God’s healing and renewing love to fill us and transform us.

I was fortunate enough to be able to go to such a sacred place, this past week, but this sanctuary and our weekly hour of worship can also be such a sacred place, a place where we are “held”. We can also create sacred places in our homes, where we set aside a space for prayer, or find them in the beauty of the natural world around us. Brother Lawrence, a lay brother in a Carmelite Priory in Paris, during the 17th Century, found closeness to God while scrubbing pots in the priory kitchen. In spite of his lowly position in the priory, he gained a reputation for profound peace, and many sought him out for spiritual guidance. The wisdom he passed on, in conversations and in letters, later became the basis for the Christian classic, *The Practice of the Presence of God*.

As Brother Geoffrey writes, *However you like to pray . . . the important fact about this practice of the presence of God is that we are not the ones in the driving seat. Our transformation is wrought by God, and is not ‘ego driven’. We cannot make transformation happen. We can only place ourselves in the presence of God and allow God’s wonderful work of grace to happen to us. But we do need to turn up! I sometimes rather humorously suggest that it’s rather like getting a sun tan. All you have to do is lie in the sun and the sun will do everything else. But you do have to actually lie there. So too with prayer, we do have to ‘turn up’, faithfully and expectantly placing ourselves in God’s presence, to give that time over to God. Even if you don’t feel anything, or you don’t think you are in the right mood, just show up and stay there. Turn yourself toward God’s light and let God do the rest!*

This coming Wednesday is Ash Wednesday, the beginning of Lent. Lent has traditionally been a time of preparation for the events of Holy Week and Easter, when we journey with Jesus to the cross, through death, and into new life. Some of us grew up with the idea that we should give something up for Lent—often something we enjoy, like chocolate, although I’ve never quite been able to see how my not eating chocolate relates to what Jesus experienced on his way to the cross. More useful is the suggestion to give up some bad habit, something in ourselves we would really like to change, such as jumping to judgment or looking for the worst in people and situations. I’ve read somewhere that it takes six weeks to change a behavior, and Lent just happens to be six weeks long!

I was thinking, this past week, that we could apply this habit-changing idea to our Star Gifts—do you remember your Star Gift? For those of you who weren’t here then, on the first Sunday after Epiphany we chose a star from a basket of stars, a star that named a gift—one that we perhaps already had, and could continue to deepen, or one that we might wish to develop. We chose our gifts blindly—the stars were upside down. I asked you to put your star where you

would see it frequently, and to live with your gift for the coming year, seeing how it manifests in your life. It occurred to me that, for Lent, we could give up something that gets in the way of our Star Gift. We might even get together with someone else in the congregation and ask them to help us discern what it is that keeps our particular gift from shining in us as brightly as it could. And then we could make a pledge to support each other in giving up the attitude or behavior that gets in our way. (If you didn't get a Star Gift, you can still do so after worship today. I've placed the Star Gift basket on the table in the narthex.)

I also like the idea that "lent" means "slow" in French. Lent can be taken as a time to slow down from the frenetic pace Brother Geoffrey speaks of. But what if we also thought of Lent as a time to "pick up" as well as a time to "give up"? What if we decided to pick up our practice of the presence of God, opening ourselves more frequently to prayer, or to quiet time just lying in the sunshine of God's love? In the first two or three Sundays of Lent, I plan to preach on prayer—why we pray, how we pray, and how prayer can transform us and our world. I also invite you to join in the practice of meditation or contemplative prayer, on Wednesdays, at 5:30, during Lent and beyond. And I hope that you will consider joining our Lenten study group beginning next Sunday, where we will discuss *The Great Spiritual Migration: How the World's Largest Religion Is Seeing a Better Way to Be Christian*, by Brian McLaren.

The practice of the presence of God is profoundly important, but it is not the whole of following Christ. As I was reminded when I returned from my retreat, the needs of the world are still there, and we are still called to respond. The experience that the disciples had with Jesus in the sacred space of the mountaintop, ended with their return to the valley below and their immediate re-immersion in the crowds and the work that await them there. Peter wanted to stay on the mountaintop, building dwellings for Jesus, and Moses, and Elijah, to capture the experience and make it permanent.

"It is good that we are here," [the disciples] say, and perhaps we can sympathize that they would want to stay up on the mountaintop where God seems quite near, Brother Geoffrey writes. *But the gift of vision and insight that the Transfiguration imparts to them and to Jesus comes not as a good in itself, but rather to strengthen them all for the trials that still lie ahead.*

Time spent with God strengthens us for whatever trials lie ahead, and the bruising of those trials sends us back to the fresh springs of time with God. According to Brother Geoffrey, *This movement toward God and then back out into the world again is the fundamental rhythm that allows for and marks the work of transformation. . . When we turn ourselves toward God, we soak in the rays of God's transforming light. The poet, William Blake writes, "And we are put on earth a little space, /That we may learn to bear the beams of love." In the moment on the mountaintop, Jesus shone with the beams of the love from [God], until even his garments blazed white as light. . . For most of us, this transfiguration will be a much more hidden experience, even unseen, for the transformation will happen within. Yet as we turn again and again toward the beams of God's love, we too will begin to bear those beams of love back out into the world.*