

Rev. Kevin V. Madigan
Church of Our Lady of Good Counsel, NYC
March 17, 2019 Lent 2nd Sunday of Year C Luke 9:29B-36

In today's Gospel Jesus' three closest disciples have an experience of what is profoundly "sacred." The veil is lifted and they glimpse the "holy." All of a sudden, they see Jesus transformed, transfigured before their eyes. They see a something "more" about Him that they had never seen before. They see beyond the appearances of things to what is truest about Him, to what is truest about life itself. They are drawn out of the ordinary tide of human affairs to glimpse the Mystery that pulls together all the loose threads of human existence. But, where do we have access to that Mystery; where do we discern, where do we recognize the holy, the sacred? Where do we discover that something "more" in life that can help us make sense of what, all too often, appears to have no rhyme or reason?

I remember hearing an old Native American man giving this a very simple definition of a "sacred" place. He said, "A place is sacred where people speak in whispers." Now, such a definition can cover a lot of territory, can take in many places besides the sanctuaries of churches and cathedrals, of mosques and synagogues, too. Such a simple definition of what is "sacred" reminds us that God is not confined to those places that we are accustomed to reserve for worship. There may even be a danger in so segmenting and compartmentalizing our lives into sacred and profane places, that we won't then recognize the appearance of the "sacred," the presence of God, in the non-religious places in our lives. For, "we speak in whispers" in many more places than in churches or synagogues. In today's Gospel, the "sacred" appears on top of a small mountain. That might be an incentive for us to look at some of those other places in our lives where we might God in a way that we might at first not expect.

So, what are some of those everyday experiences, all those places we happen upon, that can leave one with a lump in our throat, or a tear in one's eye, or a mixture of awe and dread, all the while reminding us, maybe even having to hit us over the head with the fact, that there is more to life than meets the secular eye? Let me give just a few examples. If you ever happened to be on a ship in the middle of a vast ocean, you might have found yourself walking along the deck during the night, under the canopy of the stars. Caught between these two immensities, you might have been struck by the precariousness of life--how very small we human beings are in the scheme of things, yet how we make our concerns so grand.

Parents may point to their own experience of the appearance of the "sacred." It might have been at the birth of their child, a couple looking at the tiny bundle before

them, saying that from just a few cells, from a few chromosomes, "We made that." But, then, of course there was Someone more than just the two of them in that making. Or, some might say they were struck in a very profound and personal way when visiting a place like the U.S. military cemetery near the beachhead in Normandy, France. There, looking upon all the crosses laid out with geometric position, one is struck by the heroism of those who died not far from that spot, the futility of war, and the relentless march of time. For others it may have been a trip to the Vietnam War Memorial in Washington, D.C., looking for the name of a family member or friend, who was killed in that war, so that tracing one's finger over a name carved in stone, the past, the present, the future all came together, making that loss just a bit more bearable. These are just a few of the places where "people speak in whispers,"—moments when we are tossed out of the humdrum pace of life, thrown to the edge of life, and forced to ponder what it's all about anyway. And, if we are fortunate, to recognize there is more to life than meets the eye, there is the One whom we call God who assures us that life is stronger than death, love is stronger than hate, that the victory belongs to those who continue to believe, despite humankind's attempts to prove the contrary.

My point is that the first place we discover God is not inside church, but outside in those seemingly ordinary moments of life when we are thrown off our regular course, when we suddenly realize that the "sacred" lurks behind and within all our comings and goings. And, because we recognize God outside, we come here inside to worship, to make our Thanksgiving, to renew our sense of connection with God. Then, when we return to all that we have to do in the week ahead, we will know that we are not alone, that because all places are made "sacred" by God's presence, we will have the courage to do more than we imagine we are capable of accomplishing on our own human resources.

In this morning's Gospel, Peter, John and James have this strange experience of seeing Jesus as more than just some carpenter, more than an itinerant rabbi, more than a wonder-worker healing the sick, but as God's Chosen One, as the Messiah. St. Luke records how the three apostles see Moses and Elijah speaking with Jesus about the events that will take place in Jerusalem. What is revealed to Peter, John and James is the central mystery of life—the mystery revealed in Jesus' Death and Resurrection. In the events of Holy Week they will see even more clearly that all of life participates in that dying and rising, that ebb and flow; and that our basic sin is revealed in our unwillingness to accept that fact, in our trying to hold on to what is always passing away, just as Peter wants to hold on to that privileged moment on the mountaintop by building three tents, as if just doing that would make Moses and Elijah linger longer.

This season of Lent is given to us to ponder again the connection between dying and rising in our lives: what are the things we hold onto too long, and what are those things of which we should let go? We ponder this with the hope of developing an increased awareness of the "sacred," of God's presence lurking in some very unexpected places, in the hidden corners of our lives.