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 Last Epiphany A: Matthew 17:1-9  
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 St. Anne's Episcopal Church, Annapolis  
*Transfiguration Happens*

Sue Monk Kidd writes, “When my young daughter was in the Christmas play, she got the dubious part of the Bethlehem star. After her first rehearsal she burst through the door wearing her costume, a five-pointed star lined in shiny gold tinsel designed to drape over her like a sandwich board. ‘What exactly will you be doing in the play?’ I asked her. She answered, ‘I just stand there and shine!’”<sup>1</sup> There are no small parts, and there’s no shame in just shining, as it turns out.

In today’s gospel lesson Jesus is transfigured in front of his disciples – his appearance is changed. His skin and his clothes become dazzling white, glowing with the glory of God. Just for a moment, high on this mountaintop, the disciples get a glimpse of Jesus as he really is, so alive with the presence of God, so infused with holiness, so vibrant with divinity that the light simply won’t stay in. The veil is lifted and the radiance comes flooding out.

An amazing sight – but not practical, really, for everyday. For one thing, it scares the living daylights out of people. Peter, James, and John are, understandably, terrified, awestruck, dumbfounded by this unmediated divine reality before them. It lasts just a moment though, because what happens next is this. “A cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud there came a voice, ‘This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!’”

While the dazzling light from Jesus is what gets our attention first, we need to pay some attention to this cloud. We need to pay attention to this cloud because it does a very interesting thing. It *overshadows* them.

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<sup>1</sup> In Sue Monk Kidd, *When the Heart Waits*.

There's only one other place in the Gospels where this same word is used, "overshadow." When the angel Gabriel appears to Mary and explains to her how she will become the mother of Jesus, how she will bear the child called Emmanuel, God with us, how God will bring about the salvation, the wholeness, the reconciliation of the whole world by doing something new. But God won't do it alone. God will involve humans who participate freely with God in bringing about the transformation of the world. The angel tells her, "The power of the Most High will overshadow you." And Mary says, "Okay, yes, let it be with me according to your word," and she becomes the bearer of God.

When God shows up, God often appears in and through people. Jan Richardson says, "God goes not for architecture, but for anatomy. Or, rather, God makes architecture of our anatomy." God overshadows us and we become the bearers of God. God seeks to make of us a dwelling, a habitation of the holy.

Jesus is transfigured not for his sake – but for ours. The disciples need a glimpse of the all-out, unrestrained glorious truth of his identity, so they can move forward into the dark and hard times that lie ahead. But it's as if God says, don't be distracted by the dazzle. Savor the moment and then go. Don't get stuck here. Don't *build* shelters. *Be* shelters. *You be* the place where God dwells, the place from which God acts, the bearer of God's good news in Jesus Christ.

The cloud overshadows the followers of Jesus – the power of the Most High comes upon all who follow and waits for us to say our own yes to be part of God's plans for transforming the world, to participate in the self-giving love, death, and resurrection life of Jesus Christ. To claim ourselves as habitations for the holy, dwelling places for the divine, beloved children of God who incarnate – show, make real, with flesh and bones, and hands and hearts, and feet, and eyes and ears, reality -- the love of Jesus Christ to others.

Transfiguration happens. Jesus' perfection, Jesus' holiness, the glory of God shines out of him. And Jesus invites us into his life of holiness and intimacy with God. The perfection of Jesus is enough for us too and that means he can actually use our imperfection, our brokenness as a place from which to work. Our brokenness can be offered to God not just for healing, but may even be used for God's service.

This true story is told by Dr. Rachel Naomi Remen in her book *Kitchen Table Wisdom*: A young man who had been a high school and college athlete, a baseball player, developed a terrible condition and had to have his right leg amputated. The surgery that saved his life, to him, ended his life. He could no longer do what had given him the most joy, pride, had given him his sense of identity and his strongest sense of worth. He was angry and turned to all sorts of self-destructive behavior. He began to drink heavily, use drugs, and to alienate his former admirers and friends. Eventually he was referred to a counselor for therapy. His counselor wanted him to express his feelings about himself. She gave him a drawing pad and asked him to draw a picture of his body. He drew a rough sketch of a vase, just an outline. Then, with a black crayon, right down the center of the vase he drew a deep crack. He went over and over the crack, gritting his teeth and ripping the paper. It was clear that this vase could never hold water, could never function as a vase again.

In time, though, his anger began to change. He began to pay attention to stories in the newspaper about people who had also suffered: a young man who had lost his leg in a motorcycle accident. A young woman who had been severely burned in a house fire, a boy whose hand had been destroyed in an accident. His reactions were always the same: fierce criticism of anyone who had tried to help these people. No one understood them, no one was there for them, no one could really help them. His therapist asked, if he wanted to do anything about it. Caught by surprise, at first he said no. But then, he asked if maybe he could meet some of these others who had survived injuries like his. Within a few weeks it was arranged for him to start visiting young people in the hospital whose problems were similar to his own. He found that he was often able to help in ways no one else could. He could reach others. After a while he began speaking with parents and families, helping them to understand better and know what was needed. Gradually his anger faded and faded, as he developed this ministry, this service of being with those in pain, with whose pain he could identify. He could say, I understand. He could help others who felt isolated know they were not alone.

One day, his therapist showed him the picture he had drawn, of the broken vase. She asked him if he remembered this picture he had made of his body. "You know," he said, "it's not finished." He took a yellow crayon, and he drew lines radiating from the crack in the vase out to the

edges of the paper, thick yellow lines in all directions. He smiled, put his finger on the crack, and said, “This is where the light comes through.”<sup>2</sup>

Transfiguration happens. Transfiguration happens when we listen to the voice of Jesus Christ, when we glimpse the reliable truth that he is the Son of God, God made flesh for us, God with glory made visible, made vulnerable, made tangible for us. Transfiguration happens when we know ourselves to be loved with God’s unconditional love, a love that allows us to take great risks, that sets us free to try great things. Transfiguration happens when the power of the Holy Spirit overshadows us and dwells within us and makes us no less than dwelling places for the divine, able to give and receive the hospitality of God. Transfiguration happens when we gather in this place, look at one another and see beloved sons and daughters of God, when we share the peace of God, when we reach out our hands to take bread and wine and find that it is none other than holy food and drink for holy people, the body and blood of Jesus for the body of Christ. Transfiguration happens.

In this life there are no small parts. Shine.

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<sup>2</sup> Rachel Naomi Remen, *Kitchen Table Wisdom: Stories that Heal* (Riverhead Books, 1996).