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Trinity Episcopal Church  
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Last Sunday after Epiphany, Year A

The “Transfiguration,” as it is called, is one of my favorite bible stories - or at least, as an adult, one of my favorite bible stories.

Jesus, and 3 select disciples climb a tall mountain. Why did they have to climb a mountain? Because cool things happen on mountains, and chairlifts and gondolas weren't invented yet. So they climb - perhaps a hike so difficult that only 3 of the disciples are up to the task.

Which means that they climbed, and climbed, and climbed, and drank all of their water, and climbed, and ate all their food, and climbed some more. Their feet must have hurt in their sandals - but finally they reach the top.

While the 3 disciples, Peter, and James, and his brother John were busy soaking up the view, Jesus goes through a dramatic change. When they look back at him they see something that is absolutely amazing. Jesus is shining like the sun - so bright that it hurts the eyes to look at him. His clothes were dazzling white - more dazzling white than any altar guild could bleach them. And to pull imagery from Revelation, I see Jesus in this scene as having piercing, burning red flames for eyes.

Jesus looks really cool. And terrifying. Which is incidentally a great definition of God. Really cool, and terrifying.

How many times in your life have you experienced or seen God in such a way? Have you seen a glowing figure with eyes of fire and known it was Jesus? Have you heard the voice of God loud and clear? If you have, you can probably count the experiences on one hand, even if you are living into your 80s. Some of you need no hands.

But don't worry, I won't ask you to share. Such encounters with God are deeply personal and rooted in a raw intimacy that we have with our own lives. Plus, such experiences are hard to talk about. And on top of being hard to talk about, if you have had such experiences (or one experience) of God, you have probably noticed that the more you talk about it the more energy and power of the memory rapidly fades - which is the last thing that we want to happen to a profound spiritual experience!

And, (there are a lot of "and"s here, aren't there?) And, if we have such a vision or dream or moment of divine clarity and we do have the words and the resolve to share that moment and we are willing to share even though we know it will cost us, we still hold back, because we fear that those we respect will think we are crazy.

Which I think explains Peter's reaction. I think he is saying, "Hey, I know a great not-weird way we can make this last and share it with others - let's throw together some buildings! In fact, let's make 3! I'll start the fundraiser. And when they are done, we will preserve this awesome moment, and people can come visit, experience, and be a part of this great God-transformed place."

And a voice from heaven kind of kills Peter's energy: "Peter, shut up."

Well, God didn't actually tell Peter to shut up; but he ignored him and declared just how important Jesus was, and declared a divine reminder of who Jesus was. If I was Peter however, I would hear God telling me to shut up so he could show me something really important. And that would be a great blessing.

In fact, I think we are all Peter. Helmut Thielicke was german theologian (who I would recommend to anyone who is enough of a church-nerd to read this stuff) who relied heavily on imagining all of the different perspectives we could inhabit in a bible story, which is usually quite enriching. Knowing that, and finding inhabiting different perspectives useful, I think that we are all Peter in this story. When we see something truly transformative, something truly amazing, something that permanently bends our understanding of life, purpose, even reality, we want to build a bunker around it to make it last.

And our bunker-building never works, does it? At best we expend tremendous resources creating a safe space that protects - nothing but a faded memory. At worst, we sacrifice the wellbeing of self and others to try and build an institution that actively harms people in the name of preserving someone else's faded memory.

For many of us - and all-to-often I have to include myself - what we call "the church" is just such a bunker built to keep "the world" from tarnishing the blessed memory of someone else. And that protective (and incredibly expensive) bunker is the church that is dying today.

The shell is what is dying. That is why God isn't worried. When we cry out, "What about our buildings, and our programming, and all of the stuff that we have always done!?" God is not bound by our narrow perspective. God graciously ignores our concern and says, "This is my son, the beloved, with Him I am well pleased: listen to him!"

Now, as far as I can tell, we have two options. First, we can just try praying louder: "WHAT ABOUT OUR BUILDINGS, AND OUR PROGRAMMING, AND ALL OF THE STUFF THAT WE HAVE ALWAYS DONE?" Or we can continue being like Peter, and can listen.

God is not dead. I'm not even sure that God is worried about what we might call the decline of the church. I'm not sure God cares how many warm bodies are in the pews, or how much money those warm bodies give, or how many fundraisers they put on; God definitely doesn't care how much clout they have in the community.

God cares about something else: the church. The *real* church. The real church that we try our best to participate in. The real church that we forget about when we get distracted by our anxiety around success and performance and trying to preserve what we fear losing.

The *real* church *is* growing. *God's* church *is* growing, in energy, in hope, in power, in goodness, in grace, in transformation - all of the things that we wish our bunkers did, but cannot do - *God's* church *is* growing: ask anyone who is participating in the Joining Jesus program what they think God is up to. It is happening right now. The Transfiguration. Transformation. God is happening right now.

All we have to do is decide whether or not we want anything to do with it.

Amen.