A colleague,
not long ago while we were talking about
how to recognize God’s leading in our lives,
suggested that discernment is 90% hindsight.
It’s much easier to see how the puzzle pieces fit together
long after we’ve gone through the living of particular circumstances.

Hindsight or retrospection
can give us a whole lot of clarity
that didn’t seem to be there when we were in the thick of things.

Not so different from what Jesus’ followers did,
long after Jesus was physically gone from their midst:
they got together and reflected back on their experiences
of Jesus’ life and ministry,
trying to figure out what it all meant
and how that would give them direction for their own living.

Bible scholars who comment on the transfiguration passages
that we read every year just before Lent
see this story as a retrospective.

That is, the disciples—
and, particularly in today’s reading, the writer of Matthew’s gospel—
are looking back over the ways they encountered Jesus among them
and are re-thinking what it means to say
that Jesus is God’s own anointed One,
the Light of the world,
the fullest revelation we have of God-with-us.

Because that’s what the transfiguration story is about.
Jesus the Christ, the Chosen One.
The Sent One.

This story is the fledgling church saying to the world,
“Here is the fullest revelation of the Divine for us.
In Jesus, we know the grace of God-with-us.
This One who walked among us and died in front of our eyes
and then somehow, mysteriously and miraculously,
was raised from the place of death
to walk again in our company—
he is our Lord and Christ.”

Did you notice how Matthew tells the story,
those last couple of lines we heard this morning?
As they were coming down from the mountain, Jesus ordered them,
“Tell no one about the vision until after the Son of Man has been raised from the dead.”

Clearly the faith community of Jesus’ followers
needed time and space to absorb and reflect and discern.

Those months spent in the company of Jesus
as he walked and taught and preached and healed and challenged—
those were months packed full of experience and hands-on encounters.

It isn’t until the disciples have gone through the events of Jesus’ passion and resurrection
that they can see the bigger story.

It’s only in hindsight that they are able to place this experience of Jesus’ otherness—
this illumination on the mountaintop—
into some kind of context.

Now they can look back and say to one another,
“Remember when....? Didn’t we always sense that Jesus was different?
Do you remember that time on the mountain? Just before we headed for Jerusalem?
How we suddenly saw this other side of Jesus?
Remember how scared we were? How confused?...”

Now, in the wake of all that mystery and those unexpected turns of events,
there is time for reflection, for contemplation, for discernment.

In a way, that’s what the season of Lent offers us as well—
time for reflection, contemplation, discernment.

And we prepare to enter that season,
which begins with Ash Wednesday this week,
we stop at the mount of transfiguration
to remember and reflect on this Jesus
whom we are yet again accompanying to Jerusalem
and who walks with us every step of the way on our own pilgrimages.

So what do with this mount-of-transfiguration event?
In this season of Epiphany,
we’ve been celebrating revelations big and small.
It began with the Wise Ones from the east
who recognized in the Bethlehem babe
the One who had been chosen by God and gifted to the world. Then we gathered at the Jordan River with John the Baptist who saw in the young man from Nazareth the Beloved Child of God, the Lamb who comes to redeem. Later, as Jesus taught the people from the mountain, we had more revelation: we learned to speak anew of God’s realm, to find language for a kingdom of justice and peace and harmony revealed in Jesus’ teachings and actions. And we have celebrated who we are as Jesus-people, seeing ourselves revealed as salt of the earth and light in the world. Today, the season of “Epiphany culminates in the dazzling vision of Jesus on a mountaintop in which heaven and earth, history and future, all come together with sun, cloud, past prophets, and a voice from above—to reveal the unique and beloved nature of Jesus as God’s son.”

It doesn’t feel like the stuff of ordinary life. What do we do with it? How do we manage it, cope with it, make sense of it? Well, we know what Peter does, don’t we? Poor Peter, who always carries the brunt of our uncertainties, tries to stuff it all into a box. The box of tradition. The confines of what’s familiar and therefore manageable. Peter quickly offers to contain what he sees—this blindingly bright Jesus he thought he knew, and these apparitions of history and prophet—in three booths, three traditional dwellings that would serve as containers of the holy. That’s what Peter knows, right? What he’s familiar with is a temple cult that provides an admittedly stunning house for the Holy One. The religious tradition that has raised Peter makes a place for the holy among the people. It provides a center for everyone to come to—to worship, to listen and learn, to grow in faith, to be faithful. It’s the way it’s been for a long, long time in Israel and why would it be any different now?

---

But it is different. Jesus doesn’t fit into the boxes of Phariseeism or Sadducceism or Jewish zealotry.
   He doesn’t even fit into the temple.
   And he most certainly can’t be squeezed into a holy cabin on the mountain.
And that is discomfiting.
It was for Peter (and the two others with him who were too afraid to even speak),
   and it is for us.
Because what doesn’t fit into our boxes is scary.
   We are hard-wired to organize and categorize.
   It’s how we humans make sense of things
   and find ways to manage a complicated and uncertain life.
Then along comes this radical preacher/teacher/saviour/lord,
   who asks us to step away from the organized file boxes
   and walk with him into new and different places of being and doing.

It’s a stretch, no question about it.
A group of us took some time together last fall
   to reflect on and consider what it might mean
   to be disciples of this Jesus.
We looked at the gospel of Mark but,
   no matter which gospel account we study,
   the discipleship path will take us out of the ordinary
   into places of deep challenge and overwhelming mystery.
It never has been and it never will be
   easy to follow Jesus.
We know that taking up the cross with Jesus
   is sure to stretch us and sometimes scare us.
We know that the trail from this morning’s mountaintop
   leads us into Jerusalem
   and the complexities and difficulties of facing death-dealing powers.

One thing today’s story tells us,
   with its deliberate placement at the beginning of the Jerusalem road
is that we can’t walk into that hornet’s nest without holy on our side.
This account of epiphany, this encounter with transfiguration,
   this moment of seeing Jesus in the full glory
   of truth and power and authority—
   with the full endorsement of the God of the universe—
   this is our food for the journey, our cup of blessing as we travel.
If we aren’t sure what to do with holy,
let’s do as those first disciples did:
let’s carry the moment with us.

Maybe we will come to places of reflection that will help us to make sense.
Maybe we’ll just learn to live with the mystery.

We’re used to that, after all—
we do it every time we gather at Table to feast in faith.

We’ve never really figured out what it means
to say that the risen Christ is with us in bread and cup.
But we know through experience that he is,
and we keep looking for language and metaphor to speak of it.

The Holy One, the revealed presence of God,
comes to us, not in a box of our making,
but as the living, breathing, unpredictable, beautiful, comforting One
experienced in the mystery of this sharing at Table.

As we look ahead
and try to see around the corners of the road that lies before us,
we might feel a little anxious.

We might find ourselves wishing that things were more predictable.
More familiar. More certain.

It seems, however—if we are to take our cues from faith stories ancient and contemporary—
that journeying with Jesus doesn’t always take us
into the familiar and predictable.

Not only is life uncertain,
Jesus himself doesn’t fit into any kind of mold.

But what this transfiguration story tells us
is not to be afraid.

Jesus comes to the terrified disciples and touches them—
touches them...and says,
“Come on, now...Get up and don’t be afraid.
It’s time to walk the road...”

Maybe we can’t contain the mystery.
Maybe it’s a bit awkward telling faith-stories like the transfiguration narrative.

Maybe journeying through a Lenten season
that focuses on humility and non-violent resistance
and going to the death for something—
maybe that’s more than we feel we can handle.

But, then again,
maybe we can let Jesus just be who he is.
Maybe, if we let him out of the box of our comfort zones, we will find ourselves experiencing something better than certainty. Or at least experiencing a different sort of certainty. Because what is certain is that we can depend on this One with whom we travel.

In closing this morning, I offer you an image that imprinted itself on my heart this past week as I was mulling over the mysteries of transfiguration and the holy. I just returned yesterday from a visit with my twin grandsons in Winnipeg. Jake and Levi are ten months old now, still doing a bit of catching up in the size department, but in all other ways pretty typical for their age. On one of those cold bright Winnipeg afternoons, with the sun streaming in through the living room window, my daughter-in-law began to blow soap bubbles into the air over the boys’ heads. Perfect little spheres of light and colour floated and danced around the babies, some hovering in the air, others landing gently on their heads, their upheld hands, the floor around them. The twins, generally animated and quite loud (like their dad), went completely silent. And watchful. At first they put their little hands out to catch the bubbles but, after realizing that this made the bubbles disappear, they stopped trying to hold on to these mysterious bits of loveliness. Their arms were still extended, but now they simply watched, spellbound, soaking up the beauty and strangeness as the bubbles landed on their arms and hands, sparkling with sunlight and brightness. Eventually the bubbles stopped coming and the boys turned back to their books and toys. They didn’t know that the mystery and beauty still clung to them—tiny bits of bubble-time stuck to their backs, soundless little bursts still happening around them on the floor, and the best of all—the soap bubbles they each carried on their heads, suspended on the ends of baby hair so fine it was invisible: .....like the haloes of holy mystery that we all carry with us. Amen.