"Safeway Transfiguration"
Rev. Gregory Flint
Matthew 17: 1 – 9
Sermon on March 6, 2011 (Transfiguration Sunday)

It’s early on a Monday. The first faint glow of dawn spreads over the frost-covered lawn, but you don’t notice. For it’s the beginning of another week with too much to do and too little time. You feel your chest tighten as you anticipate what’s ahead.

You gulp down some orange juice but don’t taste it. You grab the newspaper off the porch and look at the front page, with headlines about veterans trying to cope with post-traumatic stress, and about political machinations over budgets. There is a sidebar about a suicide bombing in Iraq and an insane dictator in Libya, with details inside. But you feel too fragmented to read anything.

You step outside and the cold morning air is like being slapped in the face. And then you see it – the way the early morning light on the frost-covered grass creates this luminous, translucent quality.

And you’re struck by the beauty. It’s as if you’re at a private viewing of a great artistic masterpiece. And it’s astonishing.

Well, this Monday morning epiphany only lasts for a moment or two. But for a blessed moment or two the world is transformed, transfigured by Something so much larger than you or anyone can explain. What you are seeing is Mystery. What you are experiencing is a deeper dimension to reality. It is as if God has riveted your attention on the miracle and gift of it all….

I think something like that happened on that mountain with Jesus and the three disciples. They had a mystical experience of God’s presence, on the mountaintop, in Jesus, in each other, and everywhere. For a blessed moment or two on that mountain, God riveted their attention with sheer Holiness.

But these kinds of transfiguring, mystical experiences, when the Divine rivets human attention, don’t just happen on mountaintops or only to extraordinarily religious people who have special access to a spiritual dimension not available to the rest of us.

And to be a religious mystic you don’t have to give up your everyday life, or go on a pilgrimage to some distant shrine, or find a Zen master to teach you. Though in this culture, spiritual practices like yoga, fasting, more intentional prayer, and Sabbath-keeping are well worth the effort.

But the basic requirement to be a religious mystic – to have transfiguring, transformational experiences of God – the basic requirement is to pay attention to what’s already there. For God is in what’s already there. Even in the checkout line at Safeway….
As usual you have guessed wrong about which line will be the quickest. For in your line everyone has a fistful of coupons to sort and the clerk seems to be moving in slow motion. And you feel your level of impatience rising.

Then you hear the woman in front of you speaking Spanish to her child sitting in the grocery cart. He’s maybe two, and when you make eye contact he grins. And you wink.

And you wonder – are they immigrants? Legal? What does she do? Perhaps she’s a housekeeper, you decide.

You think about the angry political rhetoric over immigration that uses the word “aliens.” But the mother and child in front of you are not aliens. They are standing in line at the Safeway, just like you.

Then the child smiles at you again. And suddenly, without warning, everything about that checkout line changes in some transfiguring way. There’s an aura around all the people in all the checkout lines, as if you are seeing everyone enveloped by the light of God’s extravagant love for everyone. And there’s this mystical sense that human separateness is more illusion than reality. That our destinies are intimately interwoven. That we are all in this wonderful and sometimes fearful thing called life, together.

And that each person has their own human measure of hurt and fear and fragile dreams, so we best treat each other gently and mercifully and with great love.

And for a blessed moment or two you no longer care how slow the line is moving. For your attention is riveted by this wonderful sense of God’s embracing love for everyone around you….

Though when such transfiguring moments happen, we’re inclined not to trust them. This is not reasonable or rational, we say. Is this just all in my head? Wishful thinking? Is this experience of God’s presence real?

You’ve just received the phone call you’ve been both anticipating and dreading. “I’ve looked at the results of your biopsy,” the doctor had said. “It’s not what we were hoping for. So let’s make an appointment to talk about options.”

Isn’t it astonishing how all of life can change with a single phone call? “Options,” he had said and you feel your imagination beginning to race uncontrollably toward the worst possible outcome. Suddenly, you feel like you’re living in a foreign land where you don’t know the language and wonder how you’ll find your way.

So you call a friend. “Can we have coffee…now?”

Over cups of coffee that neither of you really drink, you talk, and somehow it helps to hear yourself say the words out loud – about how you expected the news but it’s still harder than you imagined.

The friend wisely just listens. For advice is not what you need in these moments when everything seems to have a question mark after it. But strangely, mysteriously, just the friend’s presence seems like enough for now – this simple gift of connection over mostly untouched cups of coffee.
Then the friend just reaches out and touches your hand. Does anything banish fear more perfectly than simple human touch?

And from somewhere you remember the story: of how on the mountaintop, Jesus touched the terrified disciples and said, “Do not be afraid.”

And as you sit there something changes, as if that coffee place has been illuminated by some Holy Light.

Oh, the diagnoses is still what it is. And there are still the “options” ahead of you. But it’s as if the friend’s touch has mystically connected you to the Great Spirit Presence of God.

For you don’t have to be a spiritual giant to experience it. Nor do mystical experiences come as reward for extra goodness.

Sometimes just the touch of a human hand is enough, for a blessed moment or two, to rivet your attention on God’s transfiguring love.

So over coffee you say to your friend, “This time has been a Godsend.” And you mean it…literally.