

Friday evening my wife, Dayna and I watched the opening ceremonies of the 2018 Winter Olympics in PyeongChang, South Korea. The entire stadium was awash in brilliant colors followed by fabulous light shows and stunning fireworks that left everyone dazzled.

I wonder if a similar brilliance along with fire and smoke was encountered by Elisha as he watched Elijah being carried off in a fiery chariot. Bright fire and smoke are typically an indication of the presence of the Theophany. Moses encountered it in the burning bush and on Mount Sinai and a cloud of smoke and a pillar of fire led the people of God throughout their desert experience. Elijah called fire down from heaven to ignite his sacrifice soaked with water as the prophets of Baal could do nothing but watch in amazement. On and on in the Hebrew Bible we experience God's presence in spectacular ways.

Even St. Paul reminds the Corinthians that the worldliness of some has blinded their eyes to the "light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the likeness of God."ⁱ The Corinthians had this terrible habit of getting caught up in what others had to say about the Christ and what they needed to do for salvation. They were caught up in the wrong stuff – not in Christ. I think that the same thing happens today to many who consider themselves believers. Maybe we too get tempted and dazzled by the wrong stuff and not the stuff of the kingdom.

On the mountain top in the Gospels of Mark, Matthew, and Luke another spectacular light show with flashes of brilliance and smoke dazzle Peter, James and John as Jesus is transfigured before their eyes, "and he was transfigured before them, and his garments became glistening, intensely white. . . And there appeared to them Elijah with Moses and they were talking to Jesus"ⁱⁱ When the voice came out of the cloud we almost would expect God to say, "This is my Son isn't he magnificent. He is better than any opening ceremony the future Olympics will ever have. He is more brilliant and spectacular than any 4th of July fireworks display. Yes, he is exactly what this broken and sinful world needs and he will lead you three and the rest of the disciples to create a magnificent kingdom here on earth - a kingdom that will crush its enemies and establish my reign forever."

But that is not what the voice said, instead they heard, "This is my beloved Son; listen to him."ⁱⁱⁱ Listen to him! That was the problem; they were not listening to him. At the start of the gospel today it says, "After six days. . ."^{iv} Only six days prior had Peter declared Jesus to be the Messiah. Only six days prior did Jesus begin to explain to the disciples that he was to undergo great suffering, be rejected by the established leaders of the Jewish faith, be condemned to death but rise again. Only six days prior did Jesus have to rebuke Peter because that was not what Peter wanted to happen to Jesus. Only six days prior did Jesus tell the crowd and his disciples "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake and the sake of the gospel will save it."^v

You know it's pretty clear that the disciples were not getting the message. What about you and me? How often do we really get the message? How many times do we have to remind ourselves or be reminded that all everything we have surrounded ourselves with is passing away, that nothing in this world really matters, especially if it stands in opposition to following the Christ? How many times do we really hear that voice of God telling us to listen?

There is a principle that is often repeated in 12 Step programs: you will be handed the same puzzle again and again until you figure it out, only then can you grow spiritually into the next part of your life. The puzzle is presented in as many different ways as necessary for someone to finally get the big picture-often with dramatic activity accompanying it. I do not believe that principle is an original innovation of 12 Step programs; for it is basic to our relationship to God and our subsequent spiritual growth.

God speaks to us in many ways and in these different ways comforts and consoles us; forgives

us; answers our prayers; gives us direction and invites us to a deeper life in God. Isn't it absolutely wonderful that God speaks to us in so many different ways, that God uses every one of our senses and everyone and everything surrounding us to speak to us of God's love for us. But like the puzzle, there are times that I don't get it. I miss the big picture. Other things distract me, fill my mind, and I don't hear God talking to me and I fail to see the pieces of the puzzle; yet God continues to send the message to me. Like Samuel in the temple, God calls but I think that it is someone else; and sometimes it takes a dramatic event in order for me to finally hear what God has been saying to me all along. But hasn't the message always been there? Have you ever been there, not getting the message until it becomes known to you in some dramatic way? Or is this a phenomenon only known to clergy?

God does speak to us in so many different ways, but the invitation is always to a deeper relationship with God. God lovingly calls us to come closer, to grow into God's love for us. The choice is really ours to make-it always has been; and God is patient-God waits and, oh yes, yes, continues to love us and continues to invite us to a most intimate love with God.

I suspect that some of us fear such an intimate relationship with God. Perhaps that is why so many Christians prefer to remain closer to the surface, at the edge of the kingdom and fear traveling to its center. The individual Christian might say to himself or herself. "This is an unknown way of living for I do not know what is going to happen to me. How much of me has to change in order for me to grow into God? Will my personality change? Will I still be the same me? Or will I be someone that no one wants to be around, someone that I don't even want to be around? Will I have to dress differently? Act differently? Will I have to give up those things that I enjoy-those things that give meaning to my life?" Some of the answers are obvious: you will continue to be you and you will change. Perhaps some things that gave meaning to your life currently will cease to give that same meaning, and you will want to set them aside. This has happened in my life-there are some things that no longer hold the value they once did. It's not so much that I had to give them up, but rather, that I've passed them by.

I have a secret to share - God speaks to us most effectively in the quiet times for it is then that we listen most intently; and the greatest strides in our relationship with God come in the sheer silence, in the silent encounter with God. How much do you want to grow into God? To what extent are you willing to say, "yes" to his invitation?

There is a word used in the gospel passages from both Matthew and Mark to describe what happened to Jesus on the mountain, "And he was transfigured before them." This Greek verb, "metamorphoo", which we translate "transfigure" is found in only two other places in the New Testament: Romans 12:2, "let the renewing of your minds transform you," and 2 Corinthians 3:18, "all of us . . . are being transformed". In both Romans and Corinthians the word, "metamorphoo", designates the spiritual transformation of the Christian through grace. It is no accident that the same word, "metamorphoo", was used by Mark to describe what happened to Jesus on the mountaintop. For the believing church, the Transfiguration is a visible anticipation of the glory that will be ours in the Kingdom of Heaven; and that glory is sharing in the life of God. That glory is dazzling, magnificent, transforming and made visible through grace-through God's indwelling presence in our lives. The deeper into our lives that we invite God the more we change and the more we reflect God's glory-God's presence. You see, grace is a foretaste of heaven. How deeply God comes into us, how intimate our relationship with God depends entirely upon us! God has called us, but we have to answer! We have free will-we can say, "no, I'm not interested", and God will respect that decision and not force us-but will continue to lovingly call to us. We can say, "yes", and invite God even deeper into our lives and God will come. Yes, we will change, but not our identity, not who we are, but rather, the quality of our lives will change. If you sincerely invite God into your life and then let God lead you, you will undergo a metamorphosis, just like the butterfly. You will change from the inside out and reflect even more fully the glory of God in you. What do you lose if you choose not to invite God further into your life? You'll never know. It is sort of like the person blind from birth to whom you describe a beautiful sunset. That

person can sort of get an idea, but never the picture, never the experience. By inviting God further into your life, you become part of the sunset, part of the experience!

In just three days Lent begins. It is a sober and serious time and rightly so. Lent is time for reflection; time to look into yourself, into your current relationship with God and to look at the direction in which you are going. Does anything need to change? For most of us something does need to change. Perhaps it would be a good idea for each of us to promise to spend some time during Lent in the silent encounter with God. It is in that sheer silence when one can most intently hear God's word. Make an appointment with God and keep it. Go to some quiet place, your room, your office, be sure to turn off your cell phone, laptop, music, television, perhaps go someplace outside, your back yard, a park; someplace where you can spend quiet time with God. Spare what time you think you can at first and then little by little build up the time you spend in quiet reflection. Read some passage from the Bible, or some prayer, or recall something you remember from Sunday worship and invite God in. Reflect on the word or passage and how God speaks to you through that word. Be open to hear God's word in your heart and mind. Don't try to be in charge, let God take over. God will speak to you, if only you will listen. Don't become discouraged by distractions, but rid your mind of them when they occur so that there can be space for God to come in. And don't expect miracles, it isn't easy to be quiet in the presence of God, but it can be transforming. Celebrate your small steps in silent reflection with God and then move to the next level. Let us pray.

"My Lord and God, listening is difficult for me. I don't exactly mean difficult, for I understand that this is a matter of receiving rather than trying. What I mean is that I am so action oriented, so product driven, that doing is easier for me than being. I need your help if I am to be still and listen. I would like to try. I would like to learn how to invite your word into me so that I might grow into you." Amen

ⁱ New Revised Standard Version, 2nd Letter to the Corinthians 4: 4

ⁱⁱ Ibid, Mark 9: 2b, 3-4

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid, 9: 7b

^{iv} Ibid, 9:2a

^v Ibid, 8: 34b-35