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Last Epiphany  
Transfiguration Sunday

## UNBELIEVABLE!

**Luke 9:28-43**<sup>8</sup> Now about eight days after these sayings Jesus took with him Peter and John and James, and went up on the mountain to pray.<sup>29</sup> And while he was praying, the appearance of his face changed, and his clothes became dazzling white.<sup>30</sup> Suddenly they saw two men, Moses and Elijah, talking to him.<sup>31</sup> They appeared in glory and were speaking of his departure, which he was about to accomplish at Jerusalem.<sup>32</sup> Now Peter and his companions were weighed down with sleep; but since they had stayed awake, they saw his glory and the two men who stood with him.<sup>33</sup> Just as they were leaving him, Peter said to Jesus, "Master, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah" —not knowing what he said.<sup>34</sup> While he was saying this, a cloud came and overshadowed them; and they were terrified as they entered the cloud.<sup>35</sup> Then from the cloud came a voice that said, "This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!"<sup>36</sup> When the voice had spoken, Jesus was found alone. And they kept silent and in those days told no one any of the things they had seen.

Glistening with points of starlight, two nights ago was the clearest, cleanest night sky I have seen all winter. Behind the dark silhouette of the naked branches of a large tree I saw Orion presiding easily over the southern sky. I was quite

sure I could see a shimmering, cloudy haze on Orion's sword, a galaxy many 1000s of light years away that is named, not very poetically, "M 42". Maybe I really saw it, or perhaps I was just finding what I was looking for, imagining what I wanted to see. Who is to say? How do we separate the possible from the impossible?

Scientists say that our brains receive several billions of units of information every second. Now that *ishard* to believe, but let's suppose they are right. They go on to say that, from those billions, our awareness takes on only 2000 units of information. If that is the case, we are obviously missing a whole lot. Quantum physics is about possibilities, most of which we do not see. How do we process the 2000 bits of information, constructing our limited awareness of reality? We tend to interpret what we see in the way that is most familiar and comfortable.

There is a story about the arrival of the first ships from Europe to an island in the West Indies. What the Indians observed was an unusual pattern of waves on the shore. They had never seen anything like this before and it made them anxious. A natural response to the unknown. They did not see the ships. Their shaman studied the waves but did not see them either. After a long period of observation he finally saw the ships, which were shaping the strange wave pattern. Previously, they had no idea or image of ships so they could not see them. What we expect to see and what is familiar to our sight often determines our "take" on reality. But there may be ships and other things on the horizon that we miss completely. There may be possibilities right in front of us we have never imagined.

When Jesus takes Peter, James and John up on the mountain, the disciples see something that is completely beyond their experience and expectation. Up to this point, they have known Jesus in a particular way, with specific physical characteristics and some general patterns of behavior. But then something happens that changes the way they see Jesus, perhaps forever. As he prays alone, he is transformed (transfigured) in front of their very eyes. His face changes in appearance and his clothes become dazzling white. Then they see him talking with Moses and Elijah about his “departure” (death) that would be accomplished in Jerusalem. As if what they see is too much for them, their eyes become weighed down with sleep, a natural response to overwhelming, new information. Their sleepiness foreshadows their really falling asleep near the garden at Gethsemane. But this time they stay awake and see Jesus in his glory.

After this vision, Peter makes a very concrete, material and practical proposal; which is to make three tabernacles, one each for Jesus, Moses and Elijah. His is a very understandable response to spiritual overload. “Whew! Enough about God and mystery. Let me fry the eggs, or sweep the floor, drive the car...anything that gets me back to the reality with which I am familiar and comfortable.” There is nothing wrong with this response. Denial has sometimes received a bad rap. It can be a healthy form of self-preservation and balance. Frying the eggs or sweeping the floor may provide a refuge in which to reflect.

A saying: “Before enlightenment, wash the dishes. After enlightenment, wash the dishes.”

Back on the mountaintop, out of the blue comes a cloud, a high mountain misty cloud, the kind that can come

up very quickly in high saddles. The cloud covers Jesus and the two prophets so that the three frightened disciples no longer see them. This cloud is like the veil that covers Moses' shining face when he comes down from the mountain to deliver the law to the people of Israel awaiting him in the valley below. We need our veils to protect us from too much reality and numinosity at one time. Otherwise, we might go mad. There is much conventional wisdom suggesting that so-called "crazy" people actually see deep into reality, like a telescope exploring outer space. Their imbalance comes from trying to integrate the deeper reality with an everyday and mundane way of seeing things.

Who are we to say what is possible and what is not? It is more comfortable for me to try to interpret the symbolic and theological meaning of the transfiguration of Jesus on the mountaintop than it is to deal with the possibility that the three disciples *really* saw something close to what the story describes.

What are we missing? What ships approach our shores unseen? There are often possibilities of new life choices, desired healings, belief in eternal life and other "impossible" things... to which faith alone commands our hope to adhere. We cannot see it all, but we believe there is more. The things we routinely see awaken our longing for the things we cannot see. We do see through a "glass darkly" or a "mirror dimly". The apostle Paul's realization of his own limits enables him to imagine and believe in much more.

Every Sunday at St. John's we pray for a young boy named Gage, who has Ewing's Sarcoma, a lethal form of cancer. Gage is a member of my family. We receive regular

updates from his parents about their constant search for new forms of treatment to either cure the disease or slow down its advance. There is *nothing* that Gage's parents will not do for him. They see a possibility for his healing that seems to defy science and reality. When I finish reading the updates on their blog I sometimes think, how can they keep doing this? Maybe they should let go. But their stamina is as amazing as Gage's strong spirit and capacity to enjoy life. What strikes me is the fact that not only do his parents continue search every day for a cure when there seems to be little basis for hope, but also, just as gallantly, they seize the possibilities for adventure and enjoyment they have with Gage *now*. Gage skis and loves the outdoors. They recently also took him to Disney World where they had a ball. Now they are back home awaiting word on the next possible treatment for a possible cure. The power of love and faith, their own and that of many friends, enables them to hope passionately and to persist in exploring new possibilities.

Galaxies, ships on the horizon, mountain top visions, impossible healings...how can these things be? What do they mean for us? If one is worn down, depressed or despondent, or even just too comfortable, it is difficult to envision new possibilities. Those who live with crushing poverty may find it nearly impossible to dream of change or progress. They are sometimes criticized for lack of initiative. But we have not walked in their shoes. However, most of us, I imagine, have experienced hopelessness at some time.

If we lived in Port au Prince, Haiti, as this time, we would perhaps find more reason for despondency than hope. Yet hope and love abound even amid the ruins there. Jesus was loved and followed by the very poor. In him they found reason to hope for all kinds of things, from healings and

exorcisms to the overthrow of oppressive political, religious and economic institutions.

When he came down with the three disciples from the mountain, there was no lingering, post-visionary euphoria. Rather, it was back to work. The crowds in the valley besieged him with many needs and desires. They saw amazing possibilities in Jesus. Did he look different after he came down from the mountain? Did the disciples? We don't know.

A man calls out from the multitude beseeching Jesus to heal his son who has epileptic convulsions. The father brings his son to Jesus. Then Jesus heals him.

It all sounds a little unbelievable, doesn't it?  
Or does it?

**Galaxy M 42**