

**Reflection: Transfiguration with Special Effects**  
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**February 14<sup>th</sup>, 2010**  
**Exodus 34:29-35; Luke 9:28-36, 37-43**

We started our Epiphany season—beginning of January—fresh with *the* epiphany story of our tradition—fresh from the story of Christ’s birth in the world—in all its glory and light. And with that we were invited into a brief but intense or at least intentional season, by way of the church calendar, of watching for epiphanies in our midst. You might recall that I spoke about an epiphany being that moment, that aha, that thing that makes everything finally make sense. It is the luminous sentence or connecting point in our hearts and minds when everything up to that moment begins to make sense and everything after has a new lens and a new meaning.

The scripture texts from our tradition are intentional—pointing us in the direction of other epiphanies. [Review of Epiphany sermons here]

We have glimpsed the God who is so full of love for us that each birth, each birth cry reminds us that we are held in that love. We heard about the intimate God of love in whose image we are created, who works and reworks us for justice; and we heard of a God who comes close in spite of human frailty, regardless of age and calls us to meaningful work and purpose. We heard about a God so awesome that we cannot even begin to glimpse a portion of the divine. We heard of a God who is not bound by tradition or generation but makes and remakes and is revealed in each time and place—even ours. We talked about (or were encouraged to talk about) a God housed in beauty so much so that we cannot not ignore God even amidst all that distracts us.

So I wish I had—even for a few minutes—access to about 30 million dollars today so I could unleash a worship service with special effects!! Okay I would settle for one million. Special effects to tell the story today of transfiguration. We sit here, perched, between this season of epiphanies and the season of Lent. We move from a season of revelation, and light and awesomeness—into Lent—a season of focussing in, discipline, hard questions, difficult choices around being followers of Jesus. And special effects would be helpful. Obviously if you were like the majority of Canadians on Friday night and watched the opening ceremonies of the Olympics you would have seen special effects and multi media and artistic expression in fine form. And I think that beyond

the glitches that ceremony did something for Canadians. It **reminded us of our identity as Canadians, energized us for possibility and returned us to the story that we belong to.**

I wish I had special effects so that we could tell our sacred stories today with the same purpose.

I don't have 150 projectors making holographic images in front of us. At worship committee we had a discussion about bringing our transfiguration story alive and our dramatic readers did that—for which I am grateful.

A story of transfiguration—the climax of epiphany—is here in the stories told us. Moses goes up the mountain and we are told sees the face of God. Moses had been in the presence of God to have revealed to him the commandment/the laws of God by which they were to live—but when he returns from this encounter his face is shining with brilliance and radiance so much so that people are afraid to approach him.

It had been believed by the Israelite people that if you saw the face of God you would not live. The intensity was so bright that Moses had to veil his face. But what was accomplished in Moses coming away from that encounter with the divine was an epiphany for those who witnessed—a reminder to the people that God was close and God's covenant was real, that they would be held in God's story and that the work of God's dream in the world was possible. Moses transfigured as a blazing light before them **reminded them of their identity, energized them for possibility and returned them to the story that held them.**

We are given not just one transfiguration but two. Jesus went up the mountain with three followers Peter, John and James. And while he was praying his face changed and his clothes became dazzling white. Even his disciples heavy with the need for sleep were mesmerized by the apparent special effects—surely this is significant. They knew that time had stood still and that they were in the presence of the divine. They wanted to freeze the moment; erect memorials as it had also been seen that in that moment of blazing light Jesus had been talking to Moses and Elijah. They wanted to remember the presence of the divine.

We are told that this transfiguration was told to reveal again the identity of Jesus. And it is positioned in Luke to remind us of that before the beginning of Jesus journey to Jerusalem. So what does it do—this epiphany—it reminded Jesus followers and us of **their identity—followers of the divine, energized them for possibility (and the future) and reminded them that they were held in a greater story**

**of God's people—pointing them to remember as far back as Moses and Elijah and from whence they came.**

If we sit perched on the edge of Lent and a greater invitation with our lives to being intentional and to follow the way of Christ—what greater gift is there than to be reminded of the God that transfigures, claims, comes close and sends us out permanently changed to find a different route in our world??

Now you may grow tired of my longing or reference to the possibility I see if we had more special effects to tell our biblical story—sure it is a result of my need for drama—but it is also, as I alluded to—something that I see in other realms besides the church accomplishing what we try to in our storytelling.

Some of you know that I have a twin brother. And what is interesting about my twin (and something that continues to fascinate if not confound my parents) is that although Brian and I have similar DNA and were raised in the same home and exposed to the same things—he is not a church person. Although raised in the church he no longer attends. He doesn't get anything from church, doesn't really find meaning or relevancy in it and isn't moved by being part of the community. We are clearly opposites in this way.

I mention this because even though my brother is not a church person we recently had a theological conversation and the reason for that conversation was because of the movie *AVATAR*. Now I don't know how many of you have seen James Cameron's blockbuster. It would not normally be something I would make a priority to see. However I am glad I did. You see I think *Avatar*, among many of its themes has functioned as a transfiguration for many in our culture and many who are hungry for a greater story. I have no need to give *Avatar* more than its due and could easily have a conversation with you about its shortcomings instead of its merits.

*Avatar* is set on a planet called Pandora. The natural resources of our own planet have been pillaged and so humans have begun to colonize other planets. Jake Sulley is a Marine, who has lost the use of his legs in battle. He's offered a new start, a chance to make a difference—to serve his country by infiltrating a local tribal people, the Navi (which means a "new way"), gaining their trust and convincing them to get out of the way of a mining operation. A mining company from earth is trying to access the mineral *unobtanium* below the surface of Pandora that is worth billions of dollars.

On the planet of Pandora, the sacred is symbolized by an enormous tree of life. It has roots that reach across everything to from a web that connects to every living thing.

As the all too Hollywood and violent battle goes on between protecting the sacred and those who live in harmony and mining the unobtanium—there is an invitation, through the eyes and character of Jake, to see the sacredness of all life and be in relationship with it and to do no harm. There is a hope that those who want the minerals would be inclined not to pillage. In this age of new awareness of climate change and environmental impact, the special effects and 3D does a magnificent job of portraying the impact of destructive living. Although it takes place on a fictitious planet the theme hits close to home.

What moves me is the special effects that draw our attention to everything sacred. In the movie, whenever there is evidence of the sacred there is a glow of light, iridescent light making it impossible to ignore. Even the main character becomes significant when the sacred seeds of the sacred tree land on him—setting him aglow—as if pointing to the divine that is in him. In that portrayal of light transfiguration happens—after that moment when the divine is seen in him he is changed—he walks on the land differently and the way others treat him is different.—what claims him is different. The other leading character can no longer dismiss him after seeing the sacredness in even him—the enemy.

But what I find even more transfiguring in this Hollywood story is the conversation I had with my brother. Regardless of how one feels about the movie and its tenets...it is impossible to leave the theatre unaffected and not moved or reoriented in some way. You could, I suppose be completely numb to persistent display of the sacredness of life and side ruthlessly on the side of those who wish to destroy it but likely not. My non-religious brother found a conviction/imperative to rethink our relationship with the web of life around us. Transfiguration. And I share the notion of my colleague, Bruce Sanguin, who says: “James Cameron writes a big story for an age that is living without orienting stories that are large enough to awaken the soul. He is writing a story for those for whom the traditional stories of the religious traditions hold no sway. The viewer cannot watch this film without feeling an implicit tug to expand his or her identity from 21st century consumer to cosmic citizen.” The viewer is invited to a transformation, transfigured.

I would not suggest we abandon our sacred story to modern Hollywood—but rather see how each has a role in awakening our souls when the potential for transfiguration is there. We don't need special

effects maybe—but we do need to reread and reclaim our identity that comes from our epiphanies and pushes us forward to new possibilities. We who choose to hold these sacred stories and wonder at them for our lives—can be moved. If we look toward Lent and wonder this year what it will call from us. If we find ourselves in an identity or faith crisis—might we look to those who come down the mountain with their face aglow and look bravely on the transfiguration. It is what will hold us in our Lenten journeys, and questions, and hungers. It will unleash possibilities and remind us where we belong. May it be so.