

Celtic spirituality speaks of “thin places,” where lines between sacred and profane, divine and human, dissolve. They are places associated with encounters of the Holy, whether for those who had such experiences there in the past or those who make pilgrimages to such places now. In Catholic spirituality, the shrine of Lourdes comes to mind, where young Bernadette Soubirous once had a vision of Mary. Judaism associated mountains with such thin places. And here, the most mystical story in the New Testament takes place on a mountain.

The story collects a variety of details that add to its meaning and mystery. “Six days later” refers back to Jesus’ first teaching about his impending death, a teaching that Peter robustly rejected. Peter’s inclusion with the three who accompany Jesus up the mountain is a remarkable act of grace. The detail of Jesus’ face shining like the sun recalls the shining face of Moses when he descended Mount Sinai after standing in God’s presence. The gospels’ inclusion of Moses and Elijah on the Mount underscores how Jesus comes as fulfillment of Israel’s Law and Prophets.

There is also the very word used by Matthew and Mark to describe what happens on the mount: transfiguration. The Greek word is *metamorphoo*. Metamorphosis. It is a word we use in reference to a change an animal undergoes from one stage of life to another. In the case of a butterfly: from caterpillar to chrysalis to butterfly. Metamorphosis in geology refers to the change of one form of rock into a new form because of heat or pressure.

The obvious clues about metamorphosis in Matthew’s story are details told of Jesus, as in the shining clothes and face. But there is another metamorphosis at work here. The words from the voice in the cloud repeat those spoken at Jesus’ baptism. EXCEPT: there is an addition. “Listen to him (Jesus).” Why? The first word Jesus speaks to the disciples after that is: “Get up! And do not be afraid.” Get up, because life is not lived on the mountain. From this point forward in the gospels, the ministry of Jesus will not be meandering around Galilee. It will be a path leading to Jerusalem. And Cross. It is the path Peter had recently rejected. But Jesus will not let that be. To them to us: “Get up.” Life is not lived in the thin air of thin places. Discipleship is transfigured in the heat and pressure of faithful living. In the streets. Among the people. On the way of the cross.

***For Reflection and Action:***

*If you could ask Matthew a question about this story, what would it be; why?*

*What have been “thin places” in your experiences of the Holy in life?*

*Where do you see, or experience, transfiguration (metamorphosis) at work in the church?*