

After the Final No

C Epiph Last--Luke 9:28-36

I went to a high school full of oddballs. It was an alternative, arts-oriented school in the late eighties; it was a block from Haight and Ashbury in San Francisco; and it was the height of Generation X with all of its famed anti-authoritarianism. Half the school, it seemed, was a goth or a punk or a hippy child of hippies. And, as is usually the case with teenagers, these stances towards the world were nowhere more carefully signified than in what we wore. Pink and turquoise mohawks, multiple piercings, and lots of black leather with studs and zippers were not uncommon. There was also no shortage of peasant blouses, flannel jack shirts, ripped clothing, and crystals kept in knit pouches around the neck. Pretty much anything was cool as long as it bore no un-ironic trace of The Mainstream. So, needless to say, in my khakis and polo shirts with my one little adventurous earring, I looked downright country club by comparison with most of my peers. And tuxes and evening gowns did not even make the radar of conceivable dress.

Which is why it was such a huge coup when a small, dedicated group of students in my senior class decided that it was time for our little high school to have its first-ever prom. All year they held fund-raisers, and did little skits and fashion shows at our all-school meetings. And amazingly enough, the idea took hold. Something about their enthusiasm, their vision for this evening spent on a rented boat plying the waters of the San Francisco Bay while we all stepped into adult versions of ourselves, captured the imagination of the student body. People got behind it, and before you knew it we were

all pairing up with romantic interests or friends, and buying corsages and arriving at the San Francisco pier in our finery.

What I remember most about that evening was that I was continually flabbergasted by what I encountered. Kids who'd spent their lives in tie-dye and Birkenstocks or chains and combat boots, appeared out of the night like visions from some parallel or future world, elegant and poised in their heels and strapless gowns, their bowties and cummerbunds. We all seemed to sense it. The boys kept slapping high-fives at the sight of each other, as if we had made it into adulthood at last and it was even better than we had hoped for. And the girls glowed with that strange perfection of maturity and youth that only young women possess. It was as if we had found ourselves in a pocket of time when every promise of our young lives had been magically fulfilled, and we had been revealed to be the beautiful people we had always hoped to become, without any of the darkness--the addictions and broken hearts and cruelty and illness--that life had, in fact, already begun to deliver to us.

It was for me what people call a mountaintop experience, a rare moment in which the world is transfigured as if by some holy light. I've been thinking about these experiences recently, these transcendental encounters, and especially that one, because I learned last month that my date to that prom just died of breast cancer. She was 37, and in the middle of a very successful career as a singer. And although I haven't spoken with her in a couple decades, her passing has haunted me in a way I can't quite explain. I guess, along with all the other losses and tragedies and failures that have visited my peers in the twenty years since we graduated, it has caused me to wonder about these mountaintop experiences. Are they really a kind of lie? Were the transformations of that

evening just a matter of cosmetics--a light and mirror show masking the truth that we are broken and finite, that we fail to varying degrees and death comes to us all? Or was that prom night in fact a glimpse of a deeper and truer reality, a manifestation of who we really are and who we will surely become, maybe not in this life more than a handful of times, but some day, and forever?

Well, if I could answer that question for sure then we wouldn't call it faith. But I can say this. On this Transfiguration Sunday we celebrate what is, for Christians, the archetypal mountaintop experience. We celebrate this moment that Peter, James, and John get to have with Jesus, in which the curtain of Jesus' humanity is pulled back to reveal the divine light of God. And then, as soon as they come back down from the mountain, it's back to business as usual, with the disciples failing to cast out demons for lack of faith, and Jesus setting his face toward Jerusalem, the betrayal of his friends, and death.

And yet, the Bible does not intend the Transfiguration of Jesus to be a mockery. It is a radiant moment of truth, because as dark as the end towards which Jesus is moving may be, there is something beyond it. At the end of that end, the Bible promises us, there is a new beginning. Death and despair do not get the final word. The transfiguration of Christ, and all the smaller moments in our lives that partake of its glory--the way a spouse looked on the day of our wedding, that unusual thanksgiving when Uncle Such-and-such sobered up and people were truly thankful, the birth of a child, the view from the highest point on the Appalachian trail, even a high school prom--these rare and sustaining glimpses of light are at least weighted toward hope. They carry with them at

least the possibility that, as Wallace Stevens put it, "After the final no there comes a yes
and on that yes the future world depends."