Sunday, March 15, 1981
TRUST AND TRANSFORMATION
Matthew 17:1-9

Any change in our lives, any transformation within our-selves requires a certain amount of trust on our part, a certain amount of risk. On the other hand, those who are cynical about change in human beings are usually cynical about themselves and their own ability to change for the better. They lack trust.

The transfiguration story which was read this morning as the scripture lesson is about change or transformation. It's about mystical or life-changing spiritual experiences, how they happen, what they can mean and what we do with them. It's about those experiences which hint that there is a brighter, richer, more meaningful dimension to life.

Jesus took with him, Peter, James and John and together they went apart for prayer for replenishing their spiritua1 strength. As I said in the sermon two weeks ago entitled, "Do Not Worry!" Jesus knew the need and value of a regular time of solitude. He gained much of his strength and calmness from going apart. It is a way of regaining needed perspective.

He knew the words of Isaiah the prophet, "They who wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength, they shall mount up with wings like eagles; they shall run and not be weary; they shall walk and not faint."

Why only three disciples accompanied Jesus for this. time apart, we do not know. Sometimes he went alone. Maybe only three were invited, or perhaps only three accepted the invitation. Maybe the other nine disciples did not go in for solitude. They trusted in their own strength. They didn't need any mountaintop experiences. Or perhaps they didn't have the kind of trust which leads to trans-forming experiences. Why waste time praying when there's so much to be done?

Some people are afraid of being transformed or changed in any way. Suppose because of a transforming experience we find that what we really want of life is dangerously dif-ferent from what we have. We might even become committed to some demanding discipline. If we were to take up meditation, we might start getting up at five in the morning or become vegetarian. Who knows where it might lead us? We could become tithers to the church or start giving our money away for radical causes. Better not to trust and not be transformed in any way.

For some people, their worries provide their safe boundaries. Their worries keep them from venturing forth or trying anything the least bit different or risky. Leery of trusting the promise of an oasis, we defend the merits of the desert.

"The truth is," said New York Times columnist, Russell Baker, "I don't feel good most of the time and don't want to. Moreover, I do not comprehend why anyone else should want to. It's perfectly normal not to feel good. In our drawerful of cultural biases is the conviction that unhappiness is the mark of sensitivity and intelligence."

Some people don't want to be transformed or changed in any way.

It could be too that the other nine disciples had been with Jesus at other times when he had gone apart to pray and not much happened. We've had the same experience. We all have our

spiritual dry spells no matter who we are with. Sometimes you've been here at worship, and you felt that not much happened with you personally. Our minds wander and we get easily bored and do want to bother with prayer and worship.

Transformation takes trust and time and discipline. Those who stay in the valley all the time and try to solve all their problems and the problems of the world on their own power usually become cynical, pessimistic, and lose faith.

Jesus led the three disciples to a high mountain, apart! "While there, he was transfigured before them. What does that mean?

It means the disciples and Jesus had an overwhelming mystical experience, one that cannot be adequately des-cribed with any words. They saw everything, especially Jesus, in a new way. They were drawn into a new way of seeing.

Many people throughout the ages have had similar ex-periences. The descriptions vary depending on time and place, but underneath there are common elements.

A modern physicist named Fritjof Capra recounts such an experience in which he no longer merely believed in a dynamic universe based on his intellectual understanding but knew it to be so. He recalls that he was sitting by the ocean one late summer afternoon, watching the waves, feeling the rhythm of his breathing, when he sud-denly experienced the whole environment as a cosmic dance — not just a concept of physics, but as an immediate living experience:

"I saw cascades of energy coming down from outer space, in which particles were created and destroyed in rhythmic pulses; I saw the atoms of the elements and those of my body participating in this cosmic dance of energy; I felt its rhythm and I heard its sound, and at that moment I knew this was the Dance of creation..."

This physicist felt and experienced in a fresh way what he already knew by reason and study. In the same way the discip1es experienced Jesus Christ in a new way, even though they had been with him for a year and a half.

Another individual described his experience this way. "One day in the spring of 1977, while taking a walk after meditating, I had an electric feeling which lasted about five seconds in which I felt totally integrated with the creative force of the universe. I saw what spiritual transformation was trying to do, what my mission in life was, and several alternative ways I might accomplish it. I chose one and am making it happen."

Not at all surprising! A study of mystics in every kind of major religion through the centuries shows that in a mystical spiritual experience, one feels and senses the connectedness of all of creation, its oneness, its unity, and harmony. The mystical experience perceives the oneness of all of creation — everything is a part of the All that makes up reality, the total cosmos. To see, to understand anything means to first see and understand that it is a part of everything else, that nothing is separate and stands alone. Evelyn Underhill defines mysticism as the "art of union with reality."

In the case of the three disciples and Jesus, they ex-perienced a new kind of harmony — all was connected and in the present. The Gospels report this by saying they saw Moses and Elijah together with Jesus and a cloud overshadowed them.

There are also negative experiences which are not transforming but destructive. In these, one experiences a sense of isolation and aloneness, separateness, a sense of being completely unconnected to anything or anyone. It's a one-dimensional or two-dimensional experience.

You may have seen the article in last Sunday's paper about Paul Rowe, who not too long ago was found guilty of mur-dering his wife. During and after the mutilation of her body, he was quoted in the news article as saying, "I felt terribly alone. At the time I was the only person on earth. There was no one else. It's like the earth is a plane, like this table, and I'm in the middle. I'm the only person left on earth."

That's the exact opposite of the kind of mystical and spiritual experience we are talking about which transforms us for the good, where one senses a complete unity and harmony and oneness with all of creation and a sense of peace and exhilaration at the same time.

Two key principles seem to emerge in all positive trans-forming mystical experiences. We might call them "flow" and "wholeness," or the principles of "non-abiding" and "non-distinction."

The opposite of flow or non-abiding is static or frozen. Too often we want to stop the flow, freeze the moment; we try to imprison that which exists only in movement, flow, freedom, relationship, process. That's what the Apostle Peter suggested doing in the midst of the transfiguration experience. He said, "Let's build three booths so that we can stay here and enjoy this experience as long as possible. Forget the fever and sweat and hard work down in the valley, where we have to deal with people, their problems, pains, complaints. Leave these details with someone else.... we'll stay with God.

But the thrill of the mystical experience, the new per-spective cannot be sustained for very long. One cannot stay on the summit forever; we have to come down again. So why bother in the first place? Just this: What is above knows what is below, but what is below does not know what is above. One climbs, one sees, one descends, one sees no longer, but one has seen. There is an art of conducting oneself in the lower regions by the memory of what one saw and experienced higher up.

Jesus led the three disciples down the mountain, back into the middle of life. There they found the remaining dis-ciples attempting to deal with a father and his distraught son. The father quickly ran up to Jesus and said, "Lord have mercy on my son, for he is an epileptic, and he suffers terribly; for often he falls into the fire and often into the water. And I brought him to your disciples, and they could not heal him.

The disciples had tried and failed while Jesus was away. They could not heal the boy on their own strength. Now instead of a reassuring voice from heaven, we have a complaint about the weakness and failure of the disciples.

Jesus said, "Bring the boy to me," and he healed him. Later his embarrassed disciples asked Jesus privately, "Why could we not heal the boy?" And Jesus said, "because of your little faith." Only with God's spirit and power working in and through us can we meet the problems of the world. Jesus' answer is a caution against dogmatism, church arrogance, and trying to separate ourselves from others.

Trust and transformation! To be transformed ourselves and to be of help to others in their transformation calls for trust on our part — enough trust so as not to be afraid to let go in God's

presence, to open ourselves; to be willing to see things fresh. An old saying goes — human beings are afraid of things that cannot harm us, and we crave things that cannot help us."

Go to the mountain with Jesus! Allow yourself to be trans-formed. Experience the unity and harmony of creation! You can break through the old way of seeing things, break through old limits, past inertia, and worry and fear to new levels of fulfillment that once seemed impossible... to richness of choice, freedom, human closeness. You can be more productive, confident, comfortable with insecurity. Problems can be experienced as challenges, a chance for renewal, rather than stress. Habitual defensiveness and worry can fall away.

You can be transformed, like Peter and James and John... you can begin to see the world, other people, all of creation in a new way. Then also come down the mountain and act on your experience — comfort those who need comforting, visit the sick and those in prison, love your enemies, bless those who persecute you, knowing that all things work together for good to those who love God. Amen.