Sunday, February 25, 1990
TELL NO ONE UNTIL
Matthew 17:1-9

The story just read from the Gospel of Matthew is about mystical experiences that are life-changing. It's also about what to do with those experiences. Do you let the experience change you? Do you tell others about it? Or do you tell no one... at least for a while?

Here's what happened: Jesus took Peter, James, and John with him, and together they went apart for prayer, to replenish their spiritual strength. Jesus knew the need and value of regular times of solitude. He gained much of his strength and calmness from going apart. It was and is a way of regaining needed perspective. Jesus 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."

It was especially important for Jesus at this point in his ministry. Although he had large crowds following him and listening to his teachings, he was also experiencing increasing and strong opposition. It was becoming obvious to him that he might indeed be killed by his enemies.

So he took time off for prayer, for discerning God's will. This time, he took some of his disciples with him. 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 all were invited, but only three accepted the invitation. It's possible that the other nine disciples did not go in for solitude and time apart for prayer. They were men of action. They trusted in their own strength. Why waste time praying when there's so much to be done? Prayer can also be dangerous — it can change you. It's well known that prayer is not for the purpose of changing God but for changing us.

Some people are afraid of being transformed or changed in any way. Suppose, because of a spiritual experience, you find that what you really want out of life is dangerously different from what you have. You might even become committed to some demanding discipline. If you were to take daily prayer seriously, you could find yourself getting up earlier than usual each morning for prayer. Who knows where it might lead? You could become a tither to the church and might begin volunteering some of your free time working with the homeless.

You might begin to take Jesus' words seriously, for example, when he said, "Do not worry about tomorrow," and stop worrying about so many things. 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. Afraid of trusting the promise of an oasis, they defend the merits of the desert.

"The truth is," said the newspaper 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." Do you remember a few weeks ago in the sermon when I asked, "Why is it that we think of gloomy people as being deep?"

Some people do not want to allow themselves to be 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. Perhaps you've had that experience. We all have our spiritual dry spells. Maybe you've been here for worship and you felt that not much touched you personally.

Visions — overwhelming mystical experiences — and especially those that are life-changing do not always occur when we expect them or desire them. They cannot be manufactured. All we can do is be open to them.

So Jesus took Peter, James, and John with him up the mountain, apart. While there, he was transfigured before them. What does that mean?

It indicates that the three disciples saw Jesus in a new way and that Jesus himself was involved in some kind of mystical vision.

Many people throughout the ages have had similar experiences. The descriptions vary depending on the time and place and the words one uses to describe them. But underneath, there are some common elements.

A modern physicist described an event in which he was drawn beyond his intellectual understanding of a dynamic universe and saw it in a vision. He said that he was sitting by the ocean one late summer afternoon, watching the waves, feeling the rhythm of his breathing, when he suddenly experienced the whole environment as a cosmic dance — not just a concept of physics, but as an immediate living experience.

In his own words, he said, "I saw cascades of energy coming 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 sensed and perceived in a fresh and total way what he already knew by reason and study. In a similar form, the disciples experienced Jesus in a new way, even though they had been with him for maybe two years.

Another person described her vision in this way: "One day in the spring, 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."

A study of mystics in every culture and religion through the centuries shows that in what is described as mystical visions, there is one element that all have in common. The individual feels and senses the connectedness of all creation, its oneness, its unity, and ultimate harmony. Everything is a part of the "All" that makes up reality. Evelyn Underhill defines mysticism as the "art of union with reality."

Jesus and the three disciples with him had a vision of being connected — the past, present, and future were all one. They saw Moses and Elijah together with Jesus, and a cloud overshadowed them.

If you've ever had some kind of mystical vision or experience, the one thing you've wanted to do is to hold onto it. You wish you could prolong it. That's what Peter wanted to do. He said, "Let's build three booths so that we can capture the vision and stay here with it. Forget the fever and sweat and hard work in the world where we have to deal with complaints and failure, problems and pains."

But it can't be done. Visions come, and visions fade. But the memory of them can begin to change us. There's a power that stays within us, especially if we keep them a secret and don't tell others about them too soon.

There's something in this story of the transfiguration that I never noticed before until this past week when I was reading and studying it again. As Jesus and the three disciples were coming down the mountain, Jesus commanded them, "Tell no one the vision... until the Son of Man is raised from the dead."

"Don't tell anyone... keep it to yourself... until after the resurrection." Why would Jesus tell Peter, James, and John to tell no one what had happened in their time apart? Doesn't that seem unusual?

Yet, have you known people who tell you too much too soon — not only about their deep religious experiences, but about their problems and their successes? There's a time to talk and a time to keep silent. There's a time to tell secrets and a time to keep secrets. It depends on what the secrets are and when and to whom we are telling them.

A psychologist who appeared regularly on a radio call-in program tells this story. The subject of the day was "secrets." Listeners were invited to call in and talk to her about things they had never been able to tell another living soul.

The first caller was a man who said, "I've never told this to anyone." After a moment's hesitation, he continued. "It's this habit I've had ever since I was a child. I'm so embarrassed by it. That's why I couldn't even tell my therapist, and I saw him twice a week for seven years." The man paused nervously and then broke his own silence. "Nobody would believe I could do this. They'd think I was crazy. You see, I'm 58 years old and a vice president of a Fortune 500 Company."

He hesitated again. He had to weigh the pros and cons of speaking further. Like many people, he had chosen the anonymity of a radio program to deal with a personal crisis. He was afraid he would be destroyed if anyone knew what he was concealing. But then, with enormous effort and a rush of words, he blurted out, "I've always sucked my thumb before I go to sleep."

It was almost as if the line had gone dead. The talk-show psychologist could hear the caller's shallow breathing and sense his impulse to slam down the receiver. Then, with gentleness and understanding in her voice, she asked, "Does thumb-sucking help you relax?" It was a question that put his nightly ritual in perspective. He thought for a moment and then replied, "Yes, sucking my thumb does relax me."

They began to discuss how other people relieved their tension. He said that he'd never smoked and only had a drink occasionally, and he was proud of that. The revelation calmed him, and he began to see his behavior as less threatening. The psychologist agreed with him, and she said later that she thought since he no longer felt so mortified about his habit, he would be less anxious at night and more able to fall asleep without sucking his thumb.

Then another caller came on the line. She said that she never had trouble telling other people secrets. But she said she called in not to talk about that, but to try to find out why she didn't have any friends.

The psychologist asked her if she tended to be very open with people from the moment she met them. "Oh yes," she answered. "Last week, for example, I invited my new neighbor to dinner. She was shy, so I began talking right away. I told her about my own adoption, my homosexual son's problems, and my most recent love affair. She listened, but she wouldn't tell me anything about herself. I saw her a few days later and she didn't act very friendly. I asked her to tea, and she never showed up. What am I doing wrong?"

The psychologist said, "Perhaps you are telling too many of your secrets too soon. It sounds like you are scaring people away."

Don't tell anyone... until. Do you know people who tell too much too soon? They're always talking about when they were saved and how it changed their life forever and what they are going to do. Somehow it seems as if all their energy gets used up in talking about their spiritual experiences, and nothing much else happens.

There are times when we need to let the energy of the vision work within us. In fact, hoarding the energy, keeping the secret for a good while, seems to have been a suggestion Jesus made on a number of occasions. Someone would be healed, and Jesus would tell that one to keep it a secret. When Peter confessed Jesus to be the Christ, Jesus told him to keep it a secret — at least for a time.

Jesus gave good advice to those three disciples. "Tell no one... until after the resurrection." Deep and overwhelming spiritual experiences need to mature within us before we talk about them with others who did not have the experience. I'm not sure the other disciples would've understood the meaning of the experience on the mountain. I'm not sure that the three disciples who had the experience understood its significance until after Jesus was raised from the dead. That's why Jesus told them to wait. Many times, it is only in looking back that we begin to understand what happened to us previously.

Great mystics, those who penetrate most deeply into the secrets of God, speak of them prudently, reservedly, and with difficulty. The deepest spiritual experiences are, for the most part, inexpressible. When they need to be told to someone, they must be talked about carefully and reverently, and with the sense that there is still much lacking in our knowledge of God. "Tell no one... until." Amen.