

“GET UP AND DO NOT BE AFRAID”

Matthew 17:1-9 February 26th, 2017

Today the season between the Epiphany and the beginning of Lent concludes with the story known popularly as the “Transfiguration of Jesus.” Transfiguration is a big churchy word. As I explained to the children it just means to be changed in form or appearance.

So the story goes that Jesus took Peter and James and his brother John on a journey up a high mountain. When they arrived, suddenly Jesus began shining like the sun so that his clothes looked a dazzling white color. And as if that were not enough, Moses and Elijah appeared alongside him. Peter apparently decided that the best way to cope with the situation was to initiate a casual conversation with Jesus. “Hey, there Moses and Elijah! How y’all doin’? Anyway, uh, Jesus, I’m really honored to be here for this momentous occasion. I’m sure you three have a lot to talk about. If you’d like, I could put together three tents for you guys so you could camp out here on the mountainside for a few days and catch up!”

While Peter was making his offer, a cloud came and hovered over the entire gathering. A voice began speaking out of the cloud: “This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!”

Now, you will recall these words as very similar to the words that came at the moment of Jesus’ baptism, when the heavens opened up and God’s voice could be heard speaking. So we begin and end this series with a remarkably similar message from God: “This is my Son, the beloved. I am pleased with him.” Only now, up on the mountain, God adds a final note to the message: “Listen to him!”

Matthew tells us that when the voice spoke from the cloud, Peter and

James and John were scared out of their wits. They threw themselves on the ground and buried their faces in the dirt so they wouldn't have to see or hear anymore. Have you ever felt like that? Have you ever been so scared that you just wanted to close your eyes and stick your fingers in your ears and not see or hear another thing?

Well, it was right about that time, when the disciples were lying flat on the ground with their faces in the dirt and their arms over their heads like kids in a tornado drill, that Jesus tapped them on the shoulder and said, gently, "Hey there. It's okay. Get up. You don't need to be afraid." When they looked up, all the bad stuff had gone away and only Jesus was standing there.

It's an awful feeling to feel terrified and out of control, isn't it? And make no mistake about it—It was fear that the disciples experienced that day on the mountain: mouth-drying, heart-thumping, knee-buckling fear. And it was this scene of sheer terror that the church now recognizes each year as the Transfiguration of the Lord.

What happened on that mountain? We don't really know. All we know is that whatever it was, the disciples simply could not cope with it. They could not comprehend the magnificence of the divine presence, nor the implications of what the voice was saying. The entire experience was a mystery *way beyond* their ability to understand, and it terrified them.

This story defies interpretation, although that has not stopped legions of interpreters from trying. It is the luminous story of a mystical encounter, not only between God and God's Beloved but also between those at the center of the story and those who watch. Those at the center are Jesus, Moses, and Elijah. Those who watch are Peter, James, and John. And then, of course, there are all of us

watching all of them, most of us with the illusion that our job is to figure out what the story *means*.

Somehow we've gotten this idea that we have to figure what the stories mean. This seems to dominate the way that many of us read the Bible. Give us a passage of scripture and we will put on our thinking caps, doing our best to figure out the symbols, read between the lines and come up with the encoded message that Jesus or Luke or God has hidden in the passage for us to find. The idea seems to be that the story itself is chiefly a suitcase for conveying the meaning inside of it. If you can discern the content of the story you do not have to go rummaging around inside of it every time it comes up. Instead, you can pull the meaning out of it and place it neatly folded in a drawer where you can find it the next time you need it.

In the present case, the most common decoded message is that Moses stands for the Law, Elijah stands for the prophets, and Jesus, of course, is the Messiah. By singling out Jesus as "my Son, the Beloved," God sets the gospel over the law and the prophets. Listen to *him*, says the voice from the cloud. There are two other messages as well—not as important but to be considered perhaps: one about how it is better to keep your mouth shut in the presence of the holy than to blurt things out like Peter does and another about how the purpose of such mountaintop experiences is to strengthen us for the climb back down into the valley of the shadow of death, where our real work remains to be done.

For all I know, those are exactly the meanings that Jesus or Luke or God meant for us to get from the story; but it's important to note that the passage itself does not say any of those things. Instead, it describes something so beyond ordinary human experiences that most of us are perfectly content to watch it from *at least* this far away.

If anything even remotely that strange has ever happened to you, then you know why Peter, James and John were relieved when Jesus told them to keep what had happened to themselves. Supernatural light. Famous people coming back from the dead. God talking to you from inside a cloud. Things like that may happen in the Bible, but try talking about them now and someone's going to give you the name of a good psychiatrist. If you have to say anything at all, then you're better off sticking with the Bible commentaries. Just say the thing about Jesus surpassing the law and the prophets, poke a little fun at Peter, bury the rest. It might have been God. Then, again, it might have been last night's Thai food.

Most of us are allowed at least one direct experience of God (within bounds) -something that knocks us for a loop, blows our circuits, calls all our old certainties into question. Some churches even require you to produce one as proof of your conversion. But even in congregations that welcome signs and wonders on a regular basis, there seems to be a general consensus that life in Christ means trading in your old certainties for new ones.

Once you emerge from the cloud, you are supposed to be surer than ever what you believe. You are supposed to know who's who, what's what, where you are going in your life and why. You are supposed to have answers to all the important questions, and when you read the Bible you are supposed to know what it means. You have your Christian decoder ring, now use it!

But what if the point is not to decode the cloud but to enter into it? What if the whole Bible is less a book of certainties than it is a book of encounters, in which a staggeringly long parade of people run into God, each other, *life*—and are never the same again? I mean, what *don't* people run into in the Bible? Not just terrifying clouds and hair-raising voices but also crazy relatives, persistent infer-

tility, armed enemies, and deep depression, along with life-saving strangers, miraculous children, food in the wilderness, and knee-wobbling love.

Whether such biblical encounters come disguised as “good” or “bad,” they have a way of breaking biblical people open, or rearranging what they think they know for sure so that there is room for more divine movement in their lives. Sometimes the movement involves traveling from one place to another. Sometimes it means changing their angle on what is true and why. Sometimes it involves the almost invisible movement of one heart toward another.

Certainties can become casualties in these encounters, or at least those certainties that involve clinging to static notions of who’s who and what’s what, where you are going in your life and why. Those things can shift pretty dramatically inside the cloud of unknowing, where faith has more to do with staying fully present to what is happening right in front of you than with being certain of what it all means. The *meeting*—that’s the thing.

There isn’t any way to be sure, but Peter would have sensed that. When Jesus lit up right in front of him, Peter knew what he was seeing. The Bible calls it “God’s glory” –the shining cloud that is the sure sign of God’s capital P Presence. In the Book of Exodus, when Moses climbed Mount Sinai to fetch the tablets of the law, the whole top of the mountain stayed socked in divine cloud cover for six whole days. In 1 Kings, when Solomon dedicated the Temple in Jerusalem, a dense cloud filled up that huge place so that the priests could not even see what they were supposed to be doing. When Ezekiel had his vision of the four living creatures, he saw them in the middle of “a great cloud with brightness around it and fire flashing forth continually.”

That’s what God’s glory looks like, apparently: a big bright cloud—

dark and dazzling at the same time—an envelope for the Divine Presence that would blow people away if they looked upon it directly—so God in God’s mercy placed a cloud buffer around it, which both protected the people and made it difficult for them to see inside.

Before the cloud rolled in, Peter knew what he was seeing. What he did not see was a tent of meeting, a dwelling place, like the one where Moses met with God during the wilderness years. So Peter offered to set one up—one for each of the great ones who appeared in glory before him. “Lord...if you wish, I will make three dwellings here, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.” Peter may not have known what he was saying, but his instincts were good. He knew that he was in the presence of The Presence. He knew that God was right there, and that tent or no tent, he was standing as close as he was ever going to greet to the only kind of meeting that really matters.

As we move further into the season of Lent, the cross and the resurrection, we have a choice about how we deal with the joy and sorrow of this story and we have a choice of how we deal with these emotions in our lives. We can cut ourselves off from emotion. Keep everyone and everything at a distance. Build a fortress around our souls. Do not risk the price of wonder or of heartache.

Moving on to Lent, the inevitability of the cross weighs heavily upon us. It weighs heavily on that very faithful seventy-five year old woman who attends church every week but boycotts Palm Sunday, refusing to chant, “Crucify him, Crucify Him!” It weighs on the church school teacher who asks if there is a way to teach the miracles through Lent, because the cross seems too horrific, too difficult.

There is nothing we can do to change the fate of our Lord. We know the story only too well, and we remember the story as we endure the stories of loss

in our own ordinary lives: the suffering friends, the child who is ill, the career that has fallen apart, the relationship that seems beyond the point of healing. The question before us is this: will we be ruled by the need to protect ourselves from the emotions that stir in us during Lent, or will we risk the price of weeping and suffering, celebration and surprise when life is somehow redeemed?

Peter, James, and John accompany Jesus up the mountain after hearing the news of Jerusalem and Jesus' imminent death. It is only human that in their minds they play out the next few days and weeks. They begin to look for alternatives, desperate for a second opinion, a way to stop time. They want to build a safe sanctuary away from the world, to be content in the moment, saving Jesus and themselves from the heartache to come. They cannot, nor can we.

We glimpse that moment in a hospital room as we sit with two people who have just heard the worst news of their lives and watch the patient reach out to assure their companion, the healthy one, that all will be well. We glimpse that moment when the evening news reflects nothing but chaos, and then there is one story of a person's graceful act of healing a broken world by caring for another person the world would rather forget. These are the moments when we begin to understand that where there is suffering, there is Holy Ground. These are the moments when we realize God is present in suffering and sacrifice, just as God is present in the promise and potential of our lives.

This moment of transfiguration is just such a moment. On one hand, the transfiguration affirms Jesus' divinity; on the other, it begins to give the disciples eyes to see God's light in the chaos to come: death, loss, fear and resurrection, the work of the early church. The challenge to the disciples is to live in a world without Jesus' bodily presence. The transfiguration anticipates this challenge,

inviting us to live in “the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ” (2 Cor. 4:6). As that light shines in our hearts, the incarnate God is made real in the every day.

God prepares us in the mountaintop experiences of our lives to endure the world below, the world of the cross, the world that has the ability to break us and yet is never beyond God’s grace and mercy. These encounters happen on mountaintops with a blinding light for some. For most, they happen in the ordinary moments of our classrooms, workspaces, and soup kitchens—any place where we make a space for the Holy to be present.

The transfiguration offers the disciples the paradox that while there is nothing they can do to save themselves from suffering, there is also no way they can shield themselves from the light of God that sheds hope in their darkest moments. The mountain was the way for God to prepare a human band of companions for the sacred journey, to offer something to hold onto when they descend into the crushing reality of the world below.

The moment of transfiguration is that point at which God says to the world and to each of us that there is nothing we can do to prepare for or stand in the way of joy or sorrow. We cannot build God a monument, and we cannot keep God safe. We also cannot escape the light that God will shed on our path. We cannot escape God, Immanuel among us. God will find us in our homes and in our workplaces. God will find us when our hearts are broken and when we discover joy. God will find us when we run away from God and when we are sitting in the middle of what seems like hell. So “get up and do not be afraid.” (v.7)

For those of you who keep the Christian calendar along with the one that says this Sunday is February 26th, you know it’s the swing Sunday between

the seasons of Epiphany and Lent—the day those who follow Jesus look down at our maps and say, “Uh-oh,” because it is time to turn away from the twinkling stars of Christmas toward the deep wilderness of Lent. As gloomy as that may sound, it is very good news. Most of us are so distracted by our gadgets, so busy with our work, so addicted to our pleasures and so resistant to our depths that a nice long spell in the wilderness is just what we need.

No one can make you go, after all. But if you’ve been looking for some excuse to head to your own mountain top and pray, this is it. If you’ve been looking for some way to trade in your old certainties for new movement in your life, look no further. This is your chance to enter the cloud of unknowing and listen for whatever it is that God has to say to you. Tent or not tent, this is your chance to encounter God’s contagious glory, so that a little of that shining rubs off on you.

Today you have heard a story you can take with you when you go. It tells you that no one has to go up the mountain alone. It tells you that sometimes things get really scary before they get holy. Above all, it tells you that there is someone standing in the center of the cloud with you, shining so brightly that you may never be able to wrap your mind around him, but who is worth listening to all the same—because he is God’s beloved, and you are his, and whatever comes next, you are up to it. Amen.