



The Anti-Mountaintop Experience

A Sermon Preached by the Rev. Sean Lanigan

The Last Sunday after the Epiphany: The Transfiguration ~ March 3, 2019

Exodus 34:29-35

Moses came down from Mount Sinai. As he came down from the mountain with the two tablets of the covenant in his hand, Moses did not know that the skin of his face shone because he had been talking with God. When Aaron and all the Israelites saw Moses, the skin of his face was shining, and they were afraid to come near him. But Moses called to them; and Aaron and all the leaders of the congregation returned to him, and Moses spoke with them. Afterward all the Israelites came near, and he gave them in commandment all that the Lord had spoken with him on Mount Sinai. When Moses had finished speaking with them, he put a veil on his face; but whenever Moses went in before the Lord to speak with him, he would take the veil off, until he came out; and when he came out, and told the Israelites what he had been commanded, the Israelites would see the face of Moses, that the skin of his face was shining; and Moses would put the veil on his face again, until he went in to speak with him.

Psalm 99

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| 1 God reigns; let the people tremble; *
God is enthroned upon the cherubim; let the earth shake. | 6 Moses and Aaron among your priests,
and Samuel among those who call upon your Name, *
they called upon you, and you answered them. |
| 2 God is great in Zion *
and is high above all peoples. | 7 You spoke to them out of the pillar of cloud; *
they kept your testimonies
and the decree that you gave them. |
| 3 Let them confess God's Name,
which is great and awesome; *
God is the Holy One. | 8 "O Holy God, you answered them indeed; *
you were a God who forgave them,
yet punished them for their evil deeds." |
| 4 "O mighty Ruler, lover of justice,
you have established equity; *
you have executed justice and righteousness in Jacob." | 9 Proclaim the greatness of our God
and worship on God's holy hill, *
for our God is the Holy One. |
| 5 We proclaim your greatness, O God,
and fall down before your footstool; *
you are the Holy One. | |

2 Corinthians 3:12-4:2

Since, then, we have such a hope, we act with great boldness, not like Moses, who put a veil over his face to keep the people of Israel from gazing at the end of the glory that was being set aside. But their minds were hardened. Indeed, to this very day, when they hear the reading of the old covenant, that same veil is still there, since only in Christ is it set aside. Indeed, to this very day whenever Moses is read, a veil lies over their minds; but when one turns to the Lord, the veil is removed. Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. And all of us, with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord, the Spirit. Therefore, since it is by God's mercy that we are engaged in this ministry, we do not lose heart. We have renounced the shameful things that one hides; we refuse to practice cunning or to falsify God's word; but by the open statement of the truth we commend ourselves to the conscience of everyone in the sight of God.

Luke 9:28-36

Jesus took with him Peter and John and James, and went up on the mountain to pray. And while he was praying, the appearance of his face changed, and his clothes became dazzling white. Suddenly they saw two men, Moses and Elijah, talking to him. They appeared in glory and were speaking of his departure, which he was about to accomplish at Jerusalem. Now Peter and his companions were weighed down with sleep; but since they had stayed awake, they saw his glory and the two men who stood with him. Just as they were leaving him, Peter said to Jesus, "Master, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah" —

not knowing what he said. While he was saying this, a cloud came and overshadowed them; and they were terrified as they entered the cloud. Then from the cloud came a voice that said, "This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!" When the voice had spoken, Jesus was found alone. And they kept silent and in those days told no one any of the things they had seen.

Every time I hear this Gospel reading, this story of Jesus' Transfiguration, I end up feeling a strong sense of kinship with Peter and James and John.

For me, it's one of the most human moments in all of the Gospels. Something so beautiful and surprising happens here, as Jesus is chatting with Moses and Elijah on a picturesque mountaintop.

Take a moment to imagine the movie version of this scene with me.

The camera sweeps wide-angled across a valley, and a misty mountain peak comes into view. The camera then gains speed, rappelling up the mountain before slowing to gently approach this poignant scene.

If I were directing this film, I'm not quite sure how I would choose to position the disciples vis-a-vis the holy trio of Jesus, Moses, and Elijah. I'm guessing I'd create a little bit of distance. The text tells us that Peter and James and John were "weighed down with sleep." But not quite as sleepy as they would be the next time Jesus took them somewhere secluded to pray. So sleepy, but still awake.

I wonder: had they been there, on that mountaintop, overnight? Is this an early morning scene, with mist still clinging to the mountain peaks, and a diaphanous glow bathing the whole scene?

The time of day, of course, isn't made clear in the text. Just the residual sleepiness of the disciples: perhaps the result of trying to remain awake with Jesus through the long hours of the night.

So, I think my directorial intuition would ultimately position the disciples at least a few yards away from Jesus. Perhaps nestled against some boulders, reclining on a bit of vegetal padding, fighting off sleep.

Yet even as the disciples are fully part of the scene, from our observers' perspective, they are also observing the main action from within the scene. They are observing a most mysterious conversation unfolding among the holy trio of Jesus, Moses, and Elijah.

As Jesus gets to talking with Moses and Elijah, then, I wonder just how loudly were they speaking? The text tells us that they were speaking about "Jesus' departure, which he was about to accomplish in Jerusalem." Could Peter, James, and John hear the content this conversation? Or could they just see that something remarkable was going on, with these strange and wondrous appearance of Moses and Elijah, after a long, restless night of watching and waiting.

Did the disciples know that this conversation was part of the beginnings of the death pangs? Or were they too far beyond the conversational bubble, removed from deeper awareness about what was yet to come in the journey?

Still: whether or not they could hear the utterances of the glorified Moses and Elijah, the disciples surely did know that something was off, that Jesus' was a bit troubled, that there was already a slight haze of fear and trembling in the air.

But here, here in the midst of all of it, hundreds of feet above the trials and tribulations of their ministry, above the growing spectre of negative attention from the authorities, there was this moment of reprieve, of illumination, of hope.

Jesus was glowing, shining—just as Moses' had after he spoke with God...in the beginning. If the disciples had ever had doubts, surely this confirmed that Jesus was the real deal. That they were following the right guy.

And how wonderful to be part of it all, in this moment! How wonderful to be privy to such a scene: to such a blessed encounter among these spiritual luminaries. It must have seemed like such a perfect moment. Picture-perfect. Worthy of holding the camera steady and hanging out for a while.

And, of course, that's just what Peter and James and John wanted to do.

It's so good to be here, Jesus! Let's stay for a bit! We'll build a few dwellings right here. And just make this whole arrangement permanent. We never have to leave. Isn't it glorious! We can just chill around a perpetual campfire, listening to Moses and Elijah tell stories about the good old days.

Well, as the text tells it, a response to the disciples' construction proposal comes in the form of a cloud. A *no way, no how* cloud. An *absolutely not* cloud. And then...a voice: "This is my Son, my Chosen. Listen to him!"

When the cloud disappears, Jesus is left standing...alone. No more Moses. No more Elijah.

I imagine Jesus facing the disciples: standing before them calmly and awaiting their response. Not sure whether they will be disappointed or amazed by all that has just transpired.

My guess is that disappointment was probably the dominant feeling in that moment. It was the end of a brief but oh-so-pleasant interlude. And now it was time to go back down the mountain and continue the journey,

whatever joys and terrors the rest of the story might hold.

And surely Peter and James and John really didn't want to go.

Can't we just stay here for awhile? It's been so nice to have a little break from it all. How about just a little more rest and relaxation? Maybe Moses and Elijah will show up again. We wouldn't want to miss them!

And I imagine Jesus, with all the compassion in the world, chuckling a bit at their reluctance to leave and their efforts at bargaining. *Come on guys; let's go now; we've got so many places to go and so much to do.*

And this really shouldn't be much of a surprise. Because, of course, to be a disciple of Jesus, is necessarily to be a person on the move.

One theologian I love says it this way: "[Disciples are people] breathlessly trying to keep up with Jesus. He continues: [Following Jesus is] an adventure with many unknowns, internal arguments over which turn to take in the road, conversations along the way, visits to strange places, introductions and farewells, and much looking back and taking stock."ⁱ

And this adventure...well, it isn't always comfortable. It certainly wasn't comfortable for the first disciples. It's still not very comfortable for us.

We prefer to set up camp somewhere and tell ourselves the good old stories over and over again.

But instead, Jesus is inviting us to write new stories. Stories of being his Body in, with, and for the world. Stories of healing, redemption, and reconciliation.

We have to keep telling the old stories, of course, to remember where we've been and how to avoid some of the well-worn potholes along the way. But we also tell the old stories to help us learn how to be storytellers, too. To help us learn how to tell new stories. To participate in God's continuing revelation. To tell and show the world that it is being transfigured, even in the midst of its pain. Because, of course: you're here to leave. You're not here to stay. This is just a rest stop. Such important things happen here at church, but we come together most of all so that we can go out as new people...as God's people: brave and strong; beloved and full of love to share. We go, into a world of pain. As people who can be with pain. Because we know the story.

Still: we will want to build dwellings in any places of respite we can find. We will listen tirelessly to the prophets of yore, rather than becoming the prophets of now. We will probably want to stay home, rather than wait for Jesus alongside the road to Calvary, waiting and watching as he undergoes his brutal death march.

This faith of ours, you see: it often isn't very pretty. The road to Resurrection is littered with blood and tears. But the sages of our tradition have told us that we must keep telling the story and walking this difficult road with Jesus, all the way to the end. That's what this whole Lent thing is. A good, long walk with Jesus, into the heart of everything that terrifies us.

Maybe you've walked this way before. Maybe you've only half-heartedly walked. Maybe you've never tried walking it.

Whoever you are, there is something in this journey for you. Something you probably aren't expecting. Something a bit uncomfortable. Something that will teach you, shape you, and maybe even turn a heart of stone back into a heart of flesh.

So may this Lent soften you. We journey with Jesus so that we can better journey with this aching, groaning, beautiful, beloved world of ours.

May it be so.

Amen.

ⁱ Stanley Hauerwas and Will Willimon. Resident Aliens. Page 52.