

The Last Sunday of Epiphany
St. Peter's Church, Philadelphia 2/19/23
Exodus 24:12-18
2 Peter 1: 16-21
Matthew 17: 1-9

Thin Space

Throughout the season of Epiphany, the Gospel stories present us with moments in the life of Jesus which are truly extraordinary. Whether it's the baptism of Jesus—where the spirit of God descends like a dove from the heavens—or a wedding feast—when water is miraculously transformed into good wine—or today—when Jesus takes a select group of disciples to the top of a mountain to witness the appearance of two of the greatest figures from the Hebrew Scriptures along with the divine voice from the cloud proclaiming Jesus as God's Beloved—the scenes are meant to make an impression. Today's scene is known as the Transfiguration of Jesus, and it is definitely the “eleven o'clock” number—as they might say in the theater—when the plot reaches a high point. It is the culmination of all the manifestations of Epiphany.

This scene on the mountain top was well known among the followers of Jesus, and is rendered with only slight variation in all three gospels of Mark, Matthew and Luke. But there are some elements of it which raise my suspicions. First of all, it seems to be derivative of Moses' experience as recalled in Exodus. And the point seems fairly obvious: Jesus is shown in the company of the predecessors who did so much to shape the religion of Israel. This scene establishes Jesus' *bona fides* as being the one who he claimed to be, with the endorsement from the cloud thrown in for good measure. But, what's really odd to me is that after it all, Jesus and the disciples just seem to go back to their daily routine, as if it never told anyone. If this happened to you, would you keep it a secret? It almost feels like a dream. Perhaps it was a “private revelation” to this select group of disciples, though eventually the word went out. We hear Peter's testimony in today's epistle, after the death and resurrection of Jesus.

Almost ever since Scripture was written, people have been trying to sort out fact from fiction. Did all these things happen in the life of Jesus, or did folks conspire to tell a convincing story that tried to prove what the Church came to believe. The modern era gave rise to various strains of “biblical scholarship” in which a bunch of *fancy pants academics* tried to dissect these stories and speculated on all sorts of explanations for what was really going on. Much of this scholarship shaped the courses in Christian seminaries where people go to prepare for ministry in the mainline churches. I've heard many stories where first year seminarians “lost their faith” as soon as they entered into a course which seemed to question the literal truth of the Bible. Many others emerged from classes like that with a faith strengthened by a deeper sense of the complexity and real *authority* of scripture as a witness to the mysterious acts of God.

Those who wrote the four Gospels—let alone all the other books of the Bible—were not investigative reporters, archeological researchers or clairvoyant mystics. They also were not propagandists who conspired to shore up a particular religion. They were storytellers: People who both wrote about their experience and gathered the experience of others who had experienced something remarkable. This is how the sacred texts of all the great religions emerged. Christians have long held a kind of defensive arrogance which assumes that only our story is true. Many religions tend to do that: invest in the effort to establish themselves as superior above all others. But in this push to establish a kind of literal

testament to what we are *supposed* to believe we can often neglect many other layers of what we could believe if we liberated our imaginations and trusted our experience. And, as we hear in the letter of Peter today, prophecy or spiritual wisdom is not of human origin, but neither is it a delivery of a message without mediation. Rather, it is a Spirit-led *dialogue* between the human and the divine.

Take today's story on the top of the mountain: All of the details are important. The fact that this is a sacred place for Israel. The fact that the line of Moses to Elijah to Jesus was significant. The fact that there were many signs that this guy Jesus was very special and unique. And the fact that many had difficulty believing in Jesus, even in spite of evidence which seemed too dramatic. But the most important part of the story may not be what it says about Jesus, but rather what it says about the human experience in light of a God who was one with Creation and constantly revealing this divine mystery to us. The transfiguration is really a literal rendition that captures a reality which was true about the Christ all along.

I have known many people who have described something like a *mountaintop experience*—an experience of God that was so real, so irrefutable and so consequential that it re-directed their lives. I believe I've had a couple of these myself. It is not uncommon to reflect on these after they happen and wonder for a bit if you just imagined the whole thing. In fact, this element of uncertainty is one of the most important validating factors in the authenticity of the experience. Nothing is worse than concluding that God is telling us to do something and then running off into the world causing all sorts of havoc.

Most of the time, we may not experience these dramatic mountain top moments. Rather, we may experience the small, still voice of God during moments of prayer or meditation, in times of deep challenges, or at times of true serenity. They occur not because God is *out there someplace*, sending us spiritual text messages. It is because the space between the sacred and the profane, the God of creation and the creation itself is very thin. In fact, what many theologians and spiritual teachers would say is that what is delusional is the perception that God is anywhere but deeply within us.

I was talking with a friend a few days ago who has spent most of her adult life in Christian ministry and cultivating a deep spiritual life. She is in her 80's, retired now, and dealing with a number of medical conditions, including atrial fibrillation which keeps her almost constantly anxious that her heart cease to sustain her. She said, "I'm not ready to die, but I realize I could die at any time." The truth is, almost any of us could make that statement. My friend would say she has a very simple prayer life, and often distressed that she is not praying more. But she continues to have experiences of Jesus being present to her and consoling her. When she talks about her own death, she is both confident and concerned. I asked her if she might believe that the same experience, she often had in prayer could also be the same transcendent experience she might have after she physically dies? An experience of God being present to her, and of Jesus holding her hand. She has lived in that "thin space" of God and her life. In facing death, the realization that God has been with us all along is perhaps what might offer the most consolation and hope.

It's no wonder that so many people believe that religion is just another variation on craziness and illusion. It doesn't sit well with a narrow rational mind—one that draws straight lines between one event and another and neglects the paradoxical. But when you have the *experience* of belief—of the imminence of transcendent mystery—it's hard to go back to seeing the world simply as a flat landscape without sacred mountains clouds of holiness. When Peter and his companions came down from the

mountain, they must surely have wondered if they had just imagined it all. But they kept going on the path with Jesus, through all that was to come, toward the fulfillment of their lives.

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