

Light and Shadows

Exodus 34:29-35

Luke 9:28-43

Bloomfield Presbyterian Church on the Green

Transfiguration Sunday

February 10, 2013

One thing that amazes me about the story of the Transfiguration is that pretty much nobody saw it. Just Peter, James and John, to be precise, and they were half asleep. Did you notice that detail?

Now Peter and his companions were weighed down with sleep; but since they had stayed awake, they saw his glory. (Luke 9:32)

So here we have a very strange story indeed: Jesus glowing on the mountainside talking with two very important but very dead Israelite leaders, as witnessed by his three best friends who not exactly the three sharpest knives in the drawer and who were, admittedly, having trouble keeping their eyes open.

There's not a whole lot there for a grand jury investigation, is there? But this story is so central to the Christian faith that all three of the synoptic gospels (Matthew, Mark & Luke) include it, and churches of all denominations observe Transfiguration Sunday on the last Sunday before Lent.

Let's approach this story this morning, then, at face value, as an off-camera moment, when Jesus, out of the limelight of the crowds, shows himself in a different light, so to speak. What does this off-camera moment reveal? What makes it believable? Why is it so important to the church's understanding of Jesus? And what does it say to us?

To answer these questions we can't stand around at the edges of the story with our modern minds and apply the scientific method to hypothesize, analyze, and prove anything. This is a spiritual and not a scientific event. Long before the scientific method came into being, the third century philosopher Plotinus wrote, "You can only apprehend the Infinite by a faculty that is superior to reason."

Let us bring that superior faculty to the task of interpreting today's scripture reading. Call it spiritual imagination. Call it wonder. Call it suspension of disbelief. I don't actually care what you call it. The point is, we need to use it to enter the story.

We need to become, just for the space of these few verses, one of Jesus' closest companions. We need to climb the mountain with him, so we can pray with him, and begin to feel our tiredness, and try to fight it off. And while we are trying to fight it off, as we dangle in that half-awake but half-asleep state where dreams dance at the edge of

consciousness, we need suddenly to startle at the sight of something terrifyingly wonderful and wholly out of the ordinary.

First the light. Then the shadows. We learn from both.

In the light, Jesus' appearance changes. The face of the friend we knew looks different. His everyday clothing becomes a dazzling white. We find that we are looking at the face of God. We are in the presence of God's dazzling shimmering gleaming glory.

We see for just a few minutes what is present always: the majesty and power and presence and light of God in the person, Jesus, who has for some unfathomable reason chosen to associate with the likes of us.

And if that weren't enough, blinking, we see standing with Jesus our other two heroes--the two people we would most want to see in heaven--the rock stars of our Israelite heritage: Moses, the one, the only, and Elijah, the greatest prophet of all time.

They are talking amongst themselves and... *Shh! Listen!* But, uh oh, there goes Jesus again with more of that crazy talk about "his departure". He's been getting so morbid lately, talking about suffering and such like, but gosh--there he is with Moses and Elijah...

Oh no. Wait. Don't leave!! Moses! Elijah! Come back! We'll build altars! We'll get everybody up here to see you! People will believe and it'll be great! Please, don't leave. If you leave nobody will believe us. Don't. Leave. Us. Alone.

That was light. And now the light goes out, in our story.

Now, enter the cloud and its shadows. Still we are in our story, and still we are learning.

A cloud came and overshadowed them; and they were terrified as they entered the cloud. Then from the cloud came a voice:

"This is my Son, my Chosen. Listen to him!" (Luke 9:36)

And that it The End.

Now it is over. We are wide awake. It's just us and Jesus, again. We say nothing. Not yet, anyway. For now we are content to follow Jesus back down the mountain to the valley and the crowds and the people hungry for miracles and thirsty for rebellion against Rome.

Just as Mary nursed her newborn son in a stable, pondering angels and shepherds and wise men from the East, pondering all those things in her heart, so we ponder what we have seen and heard on the mountaintop in our off-camera moment with our strange friend Jesus.

The dazzling light! The dazzling darkness! What does this off-camera moment hold and hide for the salvation of the world? We won't know until later. We won't begin to understand until after everything starts to unravel. Until all of Jesus' crazy talk about "departing" and "suffering" and "dying" becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy, until what was for us a "great ride" with Jesus ends in a sickening crash.

On a horrible, horrible, day, unimaginably horrible no matter how you look at it, we will stand at the foot of a cross and look up on a dying man that we know is more than a man. When our friend Jesus hangs dying on that brutal instrument of torture and social control, it will be more than the death of a friend. It will be the quenching of God's glory. The eternal essence of the divine that we saw, the unchangeable perfect shimmering dazzling presence on the mountain: the Light of the World... will go out.

And we will start to understand; the world has made a horrible mistake. Somebody has pushed the red button. Somebody with the metaphorical nuclear codes has authorized their use. There is no going back. Humanity has done itself in entirely and altogether, and *woe is us*.

We will be confounded again three days later with reports that our friend Jesus is risen. We will see for ourselves that his tomb is empty. And, in time, he will appear to us. And then our understanding will deepen: the glory of Christ was being held in reserve, and is only fully revealed on the cross! The glory of the Lord is self-giving love, love even unto death, love that reverses death, love that redeems.

Still, we will not have understood it all. We will go back and rethink everything, absolutely everything that Jesus ever said and did, and we will eventually remember more of his crazy talk... How he used to say,

If any want to become my followers, they must deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me. (Luke 9:23)

Yes, that was it, wasn't it?

If any want to become my followers, they must deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me.

The glory of Christ was revealed in the cross, and it continues to be revealed in those who follow him in the way of the cross. That "crazy talk" is the best advice you and I will ever hear.

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After his Transfiguration on the mountaintop, Jesus leads his three friends back down into the valley of ordinary discipleship, where hords of everyday people with everyday needs clamor for attention. In just a few short verses, Jesus is back at work in the

trenches, in the public eye, in the crowds and throngs, in the villages and towns. The camera is full-on. *This* is what Jesus wants people to see, and to focus on! Not the mystical otherworldly moment, but the acts of compassion in everyday settings among everyday people.

The glory of God is revealed in Jesus Christ on the mountaintop, but that moment is over before it begins. And the story goes on. The hapless disciples are once again back at their master's side dealing with the crowds, handling the details.

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Today, Heather, Janice, and Bruce, have been ordained, and together with Jack, Linda, Eve, Fred, Joann, and Jeff (to come), have been installed to particular forms of ministry. They have declared their intention to follow Jesus in lowly paths of service, denying themselves and taking up their crosses, daily.

The glory of Christ is revealed in them. The legacy of Moses and Elijah continues in them, as they minister down in the valley, here amid the everyday concerns of ordinary people, you and me.

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Here in this quiet hour of worship we have *all* entered the story. We have all lingered for a while on the mountaintop and now it is time for us all to follow Jesus back down the mountain into the valley of Lent, into a season of discipleship--into a lifetime of discipleship--in ordinary settings among ordinary people.

It is time, now, for us to dazzle the world with one act of self-giving love after another, for the sake of all flesh, to the glory and praise of the One who died that all may live.

Even Jesus.

Amen.

~Rev. Ruth L. Boling