

Luke 9:28-36
August 6, 2017

Transfiguration

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Now about eight days after these sayings 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.

"Is there mystery in the universe?" A community college professor asks his students that question at the beginning of his course in the history of religion.

"Is there mystery in the universe?"

It's a great question. It speaks directly to the deepest parts of human experience. The professor—who is an atheist, by the way—uses it to take his students to that deep place at the outset, and to level the playing field among them. He knows that there may be full range of Christians—conservative to liberal—as well as Muslims, Jews, Buddhists, Hindus, atheists. His question transcends all faiths; so it is hospitable to them all. And it takes the students to the common ground of humility before the infinite and ineffable mystery of life.

In the Judeo-Christian tradition the answer is clear: God is the wellspring of mystery. We know the mystery of God's presence and action in the infinite glory of creation and in the workings of individual human lives. The heroes of our scriptures are ordinary people who have had extraordinary, transformative experiences with God and who have embraced the mystery. Like Moses with the burning bush or Mary at the Annunciation, when they respond to God's call they begin lives of new meaning and purpose in alignment with God's own.

Moses' purpose was to lead the people Israel's epic journey from captivity in Egypt to the very threshold of the promised land. His role was highly public. Mary's, instead, was private—deeply personal. Mary knew the mystery of God's transformation in her very body--the moment she agreed to be the mother, the bearer, the co-creator of the incarnate Word. After Jesus' birth, Mary witnessed the unfolding mystery of her son's destiny—in words and events, that she "kept...and pondered... in her heart."

Writer Madeleine L'Engle, author of *A Wrinkle in Time*, beautifully imagined Mary's thoughts about that mystery in this untitled poem.

Yes, of course. On many days I doubted.
My faith grew out of doubt. The child was good
but other babies have been good. He shouted
when he was hungry, like any child, for food.
One simply does not think of the Messiah
cutting teeth, eating, and eliminating.
He springs, full-grown, in the great Isaiah--
God, servant, king. And I was waiting,
remembering in my heart the very things
that caused my doubt: the angel's first appearing
to me and then to Joseph; shepherds, kings,
the flight to Egypt. Remembering was fearing;
doubt helped. I had to face it all as true
the day John baptized him. Then he knew.

Indeed, then Jesus knew. At his baptism, Jesus heard the voice of God "You are my beloved son. In you I am well pleased." He began his public ministry.

The Transfiguration, which we celebrate today, is another revelatory, mystical

moment in Jesus' life. This one was shared by three disciples: Peter, and the brothers James and John, sons of Zebedee.

With them on the mountaintop, Jesus was so affected while he prayed that he was physically transfigured before their eyes. His face and body, even his clothing were illuminated by divine grace.

In that moment, Peter, James and John had their own encounter with the mystery of God. They beheld the vision in which Jesus was joined by Moses and Elijah.

Luke tells us that they discussed Jesus' upcoming "departure" at Jerusalem. "Departure" may seem like a curiously mild word for death by crucifixion. But it's not a euphemism. It's a powerful allusion, lost in translation: the word in the original Greek is *exodus*. Sojourners' editor Jim Rice wrote: *[Jesus'] journey to Jerusalem and the events that will transpire there aren't about death so much as life....about the liberation and redemption of humanity. The Exodus of the people of God from captivity, commenced by Moses and Elijah—the Law and the Prophets—is finally in Jesus brought to fruition.*

Later, after Jesus' Resurrection, the disciples could also see that; they could connect the image of Jesus' transfigured radiance with the Exodus stories of Moses' shining countenance in the presence of God. Then they could realize that in the Transfiguration God revealed to them Jesus' part in God's great plan of salvation.

In the moment, however, Peter had an all too human reaction. Unable simply to **be** with the mystery, to dwell in silent awe for a moment, Peter was moved to act—to DO something. It was as if he needed to control or contain the experience, to ground it, fix it in time and space. With all the best intentions in the world (but not knowing what he was saying), he said to Jesus "let us make

three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses and one for Elijah".

How hard it is, indeed, for "doers" like Peter (and me) to sit, to be still, to **be** with God's presence! But it is in stillness, in silence, in prayer that **we** can be transformed. So God brought Peter to a halt, silenced him in the moment saying: "This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!"

Listen to him.

Listen first. Then let action flow from stillness, from prayer, from contemplation.

Contemplation and action are complementary, not contradictory. That is why Richard Rohr joined them in the name of the place he founded in Albuquerque: the Center for Action and Contemplation. At a talk I heard in Austin twenty years ago, Rohr said that if you begin with prayer, with contemplation, the appropriate action will come. It will naturally emerge.

To follow Jesus means to seek the mystery of God in contemplation, and to find a balance between contemplation and action. In a world like ours, where action is the norm, it takes real discipline, it takes commitment to begin the day with prayer, with contemplation and to return to it during the day.

I find it so much harder now in the unrelenting, unprecedented chaos flowing from Washington D.C. The reckless violation of centuries-long norms of governance, ethics, and human respect and the proposals that are threatening the lives of so many vulnerable people do calls for action.

That means they call for prayer, first.

Because action without reflection, without deliberation can be useless or even destructive.

As you know the *Book of Common Prayer* has collects appointed for every Sunday. Written and chosen to address the truth of the human condition, they often speak with uncanny accuracy to the conditions of the moment. Take the proper collect for today, the Feast of the Transfiguration. It includes this supplication:

Mercifully grant that we, being delivered from the disquietude of this world, may by faith behold the King in his beauty.

Perhaps, like me, right now you also seek deliverance from disquietude. If so, let me offer up this prayer.

Almighty and eternal God, so draw our hearts to you, so guide our minds, so fill our imaginations, so control our wills that we may be wholly yours, utterly dedicated to you. And THEN use us, we pray, as you will, always to your glory and the welfare of your people. Amen.