

Jesus took with him Peter and James and John, and led them up a high mountain apart, by themselves. And he was transfigured before them, and his clothes became dazzling white, such as no one on earth could bleach them. And there appeared to them Elijah with Moses, who were talking with Jesus. Then Peter said to Jesus, “Rabbi, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.” He did not know what to say, for they were terrified. Then a cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud there came a voice, “This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!” Suddenly when they looked around, they saw no one with them any more, but only Jesus.

As they were coming down the mountain, he ordered them to tell no one about what they had seen, until after the Son of Man had risen from the dead.

Trying to explain this story will only take us so far.

We can begin by saying with some confidence that the transfiguration of Jesus is the manifestation of the glory of God in Christ. Mark, Matthew and Luke all tell versions of this mystical encounter. John’s Jesus is transfigured from the very beginning as the living revelation of God’s glory on earth.

So, there is ample information available that we can gather and examine and craft into useful knowledge. With patience, we may even come to a valuable understanding. Eventually, we discover that even our best efforts cannot tame the wild mystery out of this story.

We come to see that if genuine *wisdom* is what we seek, the most fruitful path is to head up the mountain ourselves. Each of us in our own way can receive the spiritual wisdom of a mountaintop experience like Peter, James and John as they stood with Jesus, Moses and Elijah. Each of us can learn to relax our grip on the need to know and move ourselves into an overshadowing cloud, trusting the voice of God to come to us.

This last Sunday in Epiphany is an invitation to let the transfiguration story act as a pivot from the light of Epiphany to the dark contemplative wilderness of Lent. And we can carry the light of the transfiguration story up the mountain with us.

Now, the “mountains” of the Holy Land are not like the Rockies or the Cascades. They are more like the hills of Seattle. The spiritual climb is much the same. You won’t need special equipment. You *will* need to abandon

anything non-essential that weighs you down. You will need concentration and stamina. You will need time to get from the bottom to the top, and back down again. And, yes, you must come back down because right here and right now is where you are needed.

Your resolve will be tested. Your conditioning will be tested. Your senses will be tested. And when you reach the mountain-top, what you see will depend on what you are looking for.

Henri Cartier-Bresson was one of the most influential photographers of the 20th century. In talking about his art and his philosophy, Cartier-Bresson said: “What matters is to look. But people don’t look...they identify.”

Now, there’s nothing inherently wrong with identifying. That’s how we work along the progression from noise to data to knowledge and, maybe, on to understanding. “But to seek the meaning,” Cartier-Bresson went on, “...to seek the *meaning* beyond this and this...what does the eye seek out? It is a question mark.”

To seek meaning, to open ourselves to the mystery, is to seek out a question mark. To look for an experience of seeing without knowing. That’s what happened to Peter, James and John looking at Moses and Elijah; looking at their friend and teacher, Jesus, as light poured out of him.

And the light that the disciples saw was not simply the light that shines from a lamp. The light that still shines in human encounters with the glory of God is a clear light – a light that pierces through where the eternal intersects with the created world. That clear light is present, even now, pregnant with experiences of not-knowing.

To look only for what we can identify, you see, is the stance of a knower in search of certainty. To seek a question, a moment of seeing without knowing, is the transfiguring stance of a learner in search of wisdom.

And the stance of a learner allows us to catch flickering glimpses of the clear light of the glory of God through contemplative practices. Getting up the mountain requires focused and open attention. Contemplative practices keep us more fully present to encounters with the Divine *as they unfold*. Fruitful practices momentarily calm our impulse toward explanation and reassurance.

The encounter itself – that’s all we seek.

And when God grants them, the overwhelming majority of us respond like Peter did. We want to capture the moment, to memorialize it, to set up tents for Moses and Elijah and Jesus. It's a natural response – nothing wrong with it and nothing to be embarrassed about. This is the same impulse that compelled Henri Cartier-Bresson to record what he called “decisive moments” in photographs.

The same instinct led the Franciscans to build a gorgeous church on the top of Mt. Tabor in Israel, despite the ambiguity about which mountain this story actually refers to. Inside there are three chapels – one dedicated to Moses, one to Elijah and one to Jesus.

All that is fine. Photographs and art, tents and chapels can be enduring resources for recalling and encouraging encounters with the Divine light. It's just that there is another, more immediate and living home for that same light. When we, *ourselves*, enter God's clouds of unknowing, the sound of a slender silence still comes: “Hear and receive what is whispered into your heart.”

The light, you see, the light of the glory of God is made manifest and memorialized not in stone, but in *us* at our baptism. When we truly take it in, when we let ourselves hear it, the mystery of that light comes to life within us.

The Irish poet and Celtic theologian John O'Donohue said that “Light is the greatest unnoticed force of transfiguration in the world: it literally alters everything it touches and through colour dresses nature to delight, befriend, inspire and shelter us.”

And so, when we walk back down the mountain, whatever that looks like for each of us, if we have embraced the mystery, we have changed. No one who has seen the glory of God can ever be the same as they were before.

When we settle into this mystery, the encounter causes us to question what was once definite. And our lives take on a new joy, a deeper sense of peace and an expanded wonder at God's presence in the world and in each other. Our own lives – our minds, bodies and souls – become like prisms that refract the Divine clear light shining through us to give it shading, hue and tone. In short, to translate clear Divine light into visible human color.

And color, according to John O'Donohue, color is the language that light speaks to adorn the earth with beauty. “Through colour,” O'Donohue writes, “light brings its passion, kindness and imagination to all things: pink to granite,

green to leaves, blue to ocean, yellow to dawn...The miracle of color is a testament to the diverse, precise and ever surprising beauty of the primal imagination.”

Just so, every human who shines with the light of the glory of God glows with a unique combination of tones and shadows and intensities. These shift and dance as we experience life and mature, each person a living, moving kaleidoscope of colors all sourced from the clear radiance of the glory of God.

And so, drink in and take with you the beauty of the light of this last Sunday of Epiphany. That light will serve as a torch through the wilderness of Lent. To reach a mountaintop cloud, we do well to set aside our distractions, our obsessions and anything else that may be separating us from God.

If you choose to take a contemplative path through Lent, remember that even traveling light, you are not traveling alone. Even as you set aside your certainties, go with confidence that you are participating in the presence that unifies and transforms the world. As you lay down your expectations along the way, listen for what God has to say to you.

Tent or no tent, open your own heart to serve as a tabernacle for God’s transmittable glory. The transfiguration is a story about the light of the Beloved of God that dazzles the senses. To be touched by that light is to be drenched with it; *soaked* with it.

And standing at the center of God’s clouds of unknowing with us, Christ, our brother, inspires each of us to glow with our own unique and God-given combinations of kindness and compassion, strength and passion, inspiration and imagination.

Peter was right. It *is* good for us to be here.

Works consulted:

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