

Pain and Glory
Mt 17:1-9

What do we make of this strange story..... the Transfiguration of Our Lord?

It is a very strange thing indeed.

Some say it's a nice story of religious make-believe, while others call it a vision, a hallucination....

We modern folks aren't that comfortable when the unexplainable takes a seat at our dining room table...

So many see life as little more than a never ending to-do list, marking off tasks accomplished only to wake up the next next day to do it all over again.

The mystery of our lives, of each other, of creation, becomes flattened by our routines, and mystery disappears in the glare of the ordinary.

The absence of mystery was loud and clear during a recent radio interview of a top business woman who was talking about her experience with breast cancer.

She spoke of the fear that cancer brings, of the helpful and hurtful things people say, about her hair loss, the chemo, the anxiety..... until finally she is asked one last question.

"Did your experience with this disease change you?"

And there is this really long silence

.....followed by:

"No."

More silence.

"Because if I say 'yes,' I'll have to get mystical, and I won't do that.

So 'no,' breast cancer didn't change me.

I'm cancer free now, back at work, back to my life."

I have to tell you, her answer really shocked me.

How can you come nose to nose with your own mortality -- and not be changed?

And I wondered if that highly educated, articulate woman was afraid, maybe even terrified, of the mysterious, of the unknowable in life.

In these Facebook SnapChat times it seems our field of vision is becoming very small indeed....if it cannot be captured on my iPhone, it must be fantasy or illusion.

It's not just atheists who feel this way.

Avoiding mystery is quite common among those who claim Christ as their Lord.

Our fundamentalist friends avoid it with pat answers to all that life throws at us by pointing to this or that Bible verse; while our liberal friends dismiss the unknown as they argue against the bodily resurrection of Jesus or deny the full humanity and divinity of Jesus; "it's enough that he was a good man," they say....

My own sense is that we are terrified of mystery.... **because it says NO!** to our tireless yet fruitless efforts to control people, places and things.

No wonder Jesus says **this** to his friends just before they are confronted by the mystery of the transfiguration:

"You're not in the driver's seat, I am!

Don't run from suffering, embrace it!

Self-sacrifice is the way, my way, to finding yourself, your true self!" Mt 16:24-6

In the transfiguration, God tells us that the authentic life, the meaningful life, the life worth living, is encountered at the intersection of pain and glory....that pain is wrapped in glory, just as glory is wrapped in pain.

Not that pain is something we want, but if we are faithful followers of Jesus, people who seek peace even with our enemies, people who work for a justice that doesn't punish but restores, then there will be plenty of pain, because that life is most unwelcome in this world.

These last many weeks we've eavesdropped on Jesus as he blesses life's losers, as he changes the meaning of justice from "getting what you deserve" to "healing relationships."

We have listened in as Jesus brings the law not to an end but to its full fruit and flower, engaging in the subversive activity of praying for those who hope we will fail.

It's subversive because forgiveness and risk and letting go disarms the vengeance and self-seeking our society is built on.

Watching Jesus walk up that hill with his three friends, you see only an ordinary Jew, but there is something hiding beneath the glare of the ordinary.

Perhaps you've had the experience of standing above a bay or lagoon in the direct sunlight.

Because of the glare, you can only see the surface,.

And then a cloud covers the sun -- suddenly you see straight to the bottom, seeing sights never seen before, right before your eyes, because the glare of the ordinary has retreated, revealing fantastic things that are usually hidden.

That's what happens today with Jesus, as the cloud covers the sun..... and the depths, the mystery, of who Jesus is..... comes suddenly, shockingly, into view.

The depths, the mystery, of Jesus reveal to those with eyes to see that glory and suffering are completely entwined, as an ordinary, dust covered Jew, heading for Jerusalem, heading for the cross, is transformed into one..... who shines!

Too many who claim Christ as Lord see only the surface, seeing only the obligation to attend the mass, rituals to satisfy.

But Jesus calls from his depths to our depths, urging us out of ourselves into service for one another.

The depths of Jesus call to us today as millions of immigrants, many brought here as children, face deportation from the only country they've ever known, while churches struggle with whether and how to provide sanctuary....

The depths of Jesus challenge us to ask why we have created a world in which 78 people own as much wealth as 3.5 billion people...

The transfiguration of our Lord shines an unmistakable light on the intersection of pain and glory.

That intersection appears again in six short weeks as the one whose garments today shine like the sun has those same clothes divvied up by dice rolling soldiers; as the one who speaks with Elijah today hears passersby jeeringly ask: "where is Elijah now?!" as the three men who witness the very presence of God on the mountaintop sit quivering in a locked room – while three women stand at the foot of the cross – as Peter's three booths are replaced by three crosses – the intersection between pain and glory, this is the central mystery of our lives, and we run from it at our peril, because to run from this intersection is to run from the very deepest meaning to be found in life.

And perhaps some of that meaning is this.

We are made in the image of God.

We exist in order to be co-creators with God, a calling we so often surrender in favor of safety and security...yet nevertheless, we are who we are, and God's will for us, our sacred destiny, will not be denied forever.

Never forget that in humanity, what began as a universe made up only of unconscious matter has evolved into beings who can think and feel, beings capable of giving themselves away with love, freely to one another. MacKinnon, Mystery, paraphrased.

Self giving sets all of creation in motion, it is the outpouring of God's own self giving, making and sustaining all things.

Jesus comes among us to teach us how to give back to God all that God gives to us, creating a sacred flow of giving and receiving, restoring our intimacy with, our trust in, our freedom in, this loving God who gives all for the sheer delight of it all....so that no matter the circumstances of our lives, we are always held in the palm of God's gloriously suffering hand. Id.

I have often wondered whether that well spoken cancer survivor thought more about the answer she gave in her interview.

Perhaps in the days and weeks following her interview she returned to the intersection of pain and glory, and in the returning, chose to surrender to mystery, opening herself to the vast unknown, opening herself to the compassionate womb, whom we call God...

And in that openness, perhaps she discovered that whenever we summon the courage to surrender into the mystery that enfolds us, perhaps she too, at that very moment, like Jesus on the mountaintop, found it possible, if only for a moment to shine!

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