

The Shifting Light

We live in an era and in a culture when sitting with mystery seems like the worst sort of time wasting.

So often life may seem as little more than a series of tasks to accomplish, check-offs on a never ending to-do list, wrapped up with some night time television, only to wake up 7 hours later to do it all again.

The mystery of our lives, the mystery of each other, the mystery of this world and the mystery of all of creation can, especially these days, it seems, become flattened into the routine and predictable, and mystery disappears in the glare of the ordinary.

I've been thinking about the seeming absence of mystery **not only** because we have crouched in low this morning, dumbfounded with the apostles as we join them on that hilltop, witnessing the transfiguration of our Lord, but also because of a radio interview I heard a few days ago.

A big boss with NPR was being interviewed because she just published a new book about her experience with breast cancer.

She spoke at some length about the fear that comes with cancer, the many helpful and unhelpful things that people say to those with cancer; she talked about the hair and eyebrow loss, the chemo, the anxiety....., until finally she is asked one last question.

It's a really good question:

"Did your experience with this disease change you?"

And there is this loooooong silence, when finally she says: "No."

More silence.

And then this:

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

Probably it's me, but I was surprised by her answer.

I wondered how you can come face to face with your own mortality and not be changed?

What I was hearing, I think, (between the lines) from that highly educated, extremely articulate woman was something that seems to run between the lines with so many folks today: it is, if not a fear, then perhaps an embarrassment, with that which is deep, with that which is mysterious, with that which is unknowable in life.

We live in times where it seems we prefer the routine and the ordinary, where we define reality exclusively by what our five senses reveal — all else being mere fantasy and illusion, so say the secularists and modern atheists.

And they are not alone.

Shying away from mystery runs in the veins of many who claim Christ as their Lord.

Whether it's our fundamentalist friends who have every aspect of faith neatly explained, with an answer to every question found in this or that Bible verse, or their more liberal twins, men like Marcus Borg or John Crossan who ask:

“Why do you need to believe in the bodily resurrection of Jesus?”

“Why can't you see Jesus simply as a good man, blessed by God, but certainly not the Son of God?”

Into this human need to flatten reality so that we can possess and control it, into that human need comes Jesus.

The Transfiguration of our Lord is, it seems, God's “no” to us when we try to whittle Jesus down to size.

My brother, like some of our top theologians, loves to talk about Jesus as a “wise teacher” or as a “prophet,” but, don't give him any of that “Son of God” stuff.

I know, as I'm sure you do, plenty of folks who share that view.

But make no mistake, there is a rhyme and a reason for whittling Jesus down to size: it allows us to pick and choose what to follow and what to ignore.

After having eavesdropped on Jesus these last many weeks, as he speaks about the blessed condition of life's losers, as he insists we carve God's law not onto courthouse monuments but onto our hearts, as he turns "down" into the new "up" by commanding us to love our enemies, enemies on the outside and those on the inside, it's not hard to see why so many want to whittle Jesus down to size.

But today, God is having none of it.

Six days after Peter identifies Jesus as the Messiah, Jesus takes three of them up the mountain.

Just as God comes into his rest following six days of creation, so Jesus, after six days, is shown to be not only an itinerant Jewish preacher, but also the Son of the Living God: fully human, yet strangely and inexplicably, fully divine.

Looking at Jesus walking up that steep hill with three of his closest friends, you only see an ordinary Jew, grimy from the dust on the road, but an ordinary Jew nonetheless.

But that's not the whole story.

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

All you can see is the surface, because of the glare of the sun.

And then a cloud covers the sun, and the light shifts -- suddenly you can see -- you can see deep down, all the way to the bottom, and sights you never expected to see are there, right before your eyes, sights which the glare of the ordinary usually keeps hidden.

Something like that happens today with Jesus and the disciples on that mountain top, when the cloud covers the sun so that the depths of who Jesus is comes suddenly, and frightfully, into view.

The Transfiguration is God's way of helping us to keep from whittling Jesus down to size.

And yet, we modern folk have a hard time with brilliant lights and booming voices from the heavens.

What really happened, we ask?

What if Peter whipped out his video camera, filming the whole thing?

What does his You-Tube post look like, we ask?

Yet people then were not significantly different from people today.

Something astonishing happened.

Something they didn't understand.

Peter begins babbling about building little churches, and halfway through his rambling, is cut off by a voice saying to them, saying to us:

"Listen to him"

This event remains so vivid to Peter that years later, he tells it again in his second letter that we heard today.

Matthew, Mark and Luke all record this stunning and unexpected vision.

All of which brings us back to the main question: "Who is this Jesus?"

That is the core question.

It is a core question because our answer determines how we live our lives, day in, day out.

Who is this Jesus?

Folks inside and outside the church ask that question all the time.

The Lutheran pastor and theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer asked it before and after he was sent to a Nazi concentration camp, when all through Germany powerful clergymen were lining up behind Adolph Hitler.

Archbishop Desmond Tutu asked that question when South Africa stood at the crossroads of civil war and civil reconciliation.

And today, living in a world where income disparity has become so grotesque that 78 individuals (not companies, not corporations, not countries, but 78

people!) own as much wealth as the 3.5 billion people on the bottom half of the economic barrel, we who claim Jesus as Lord ask the same question.

Who is Jesus?

We are called to ask that question every day, and the answer will direct the course of our lives.

Flannery O'Connor, a product of the Deep South, died at the too young age of 39, after producing dozens of remarkable short stories.

In one of those stories, she tells of a family who has the misfortune of being in a car accident in a remote area.

As it happens, their car crashes just down the hill from where an escaped murderer is hiding out.

The murderer is nicknamed Misfit, and he starts killing off one member of the family after another.

The grandma appeals to Misfit to think of Jesus and to stop what he is doing.

And Misfit says:

"Jesus was the only one that ever raised the dead, 'and he shouldn't have done it. He thrown everything off balance. If he did what he said, then it's nothing for you to do but throw away everything and follow him, and if he didn't, then there's nothing for you to do but enjoy the few minutes you got left the best way you can, by killing somebody or burning down his home or doing some other meanness to him." F. O'Connor, *A Good Man is Hard To Find*.

Jesus really does create a fork in the road, as even the Misfit knew.

Either he is who the voice from the cloud insists he is, "My son, the Beloved," or he is a fraud, a charlatan, just another failure in a long line of failed messiahs.

Either way, it matters.

It matters a lot.

Who do you say Jesus is?

It's the same question Jesus asks his disciples just before this lonely journey to the top of the mountain:

"Who do you say that I am?"

It is a question we often avoid looking at in the eye; preferring to leave the question hanging; because the answer, no matter the answer, has such profound consequences for how we live our lives.

Today, God answers the question.

The blinding light, the voice thundering from the sky, saying: "Wake up!" "Pay Attention!"

It is indeed a wake up call.

I've quoted Annie Dillard to you before, and on Transfiguration Sunday, it seems like a good idea to quote her again, as she leans in close to us as we all of us, especially me, tend to sit so nonchalantly in our pews, as she asks, with a tremor in her voice:

"Does anyone have the foggiest idea of what sort of power we blithely invoke?"

Or, as I suspect, does no one believe a word of it?

The churches are children playing on the floor with their chemistry sets, mixing up a batch of TNT to kill a Sunday morning."

"It is madness to wear ladies straw hats and velvet hats to church; we should all be wearing crash helmets

Ushers should issue life preservers and signal flares; they should lash us to our pews"

"For the sleeping God may awake someday and take offense; or the waking God may draw us to where we can never return."

Such is the Transfiguration of our Lord.

The transfiguration of our Lord tears the veil separating heaven and earth, just as that veil will tear in the temple just six weeks from now, as the one who today is consumed by light hangs dying from a tree: as the one whose

garments shine today will see those same clothes being divvied up by dice rolling soldiers; as the one who speaks to Elijah today will hear the scornful laughter of passersby insisting that “Elijah isn’t coming to save you now!”; as the apostles who stand today in the very presence of God are found quivering in a locked room — the veil between the ordinary and the holy, as much as we deny it, is thin indeed, and it can be breached at any moment.

And so perhaps we should not be lulled, like our NPR executive, into thinking that mystery is a place to avoid.

Instead, be reminded that while sometimes God meets us on the mountaintop of profound experience, God most often meets us in the ordinary bend of our daily lives, with a gentle touch, a kind word, a nod of understanding.

After the light, after the booming voice and command that we “listen to him” perhaps then, alone with Jesus, we can begin to see that whether in joy or sorrow, God is.

That God seeks us out not in monuments, but through one another.

That God is risky and dangerous, especially to our settled ways.

That God will pay any price to have us.

That we cannot escape God -- for God will find us in our homes, and in our work, “when our hearts are broken and when we discover joy.

God will find us when we run away from God and when we are sitting in the midst of what seems like hell.” M. Anshute, *1A Feasting on the Word*, 456.

Now the light is gone, and the voice no longer lingers.

There they are, alone with Jesus.

Peter, Andrew and James.

He bends over, touching each on the shoulder:

“Be raised, don’t be afraid”; he says to them, to you, to me.

As we each of us rise, at the gentle urging of Jesus, perhaps it is then that we can say once again,

“You are the Messiah, the Son of the Living God”

“Help me to follow you”

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