

5th Sunday after the Epiphany – The Transfiguration of the Lord

February 7th, 2016

Luke 9:28-43

Overwhelmed by God's Greatness

I want you to picture this scene. "As Jesus was praying, the appearance of his face changed and his clothes flashed white like lightning. Two men, Moses and Elijah, were talking with him. They were clothed with heavenly splendor and spoke about Jesus' departure, which he would achieve in Jerusalem."

So do you have that scene firmly in mind? Now I want to read the next sentence. "Peter and those with him were almost overcome by sleep, but they managed to stay awake and saw his glory as well as the two men with him."

Does that strike you as a little strange? Jesus' whole body is flashing with light, Moses and Elijah, both long dead and both heroes of the faith, suddenly appear with Jesus and they're clothed with heavenly splendor. All three of them, Jesus, Moses and Elijah, are talking about Jesus' up-coming and final trip to Jerusalem and what Jesus will achieve by it. Meanwhile, Peter and the two disciples can barely keep their eyes open. They're so sleepy they almost miss the whole thing.

This could be a comedy routine for Saturday Night live. It reminds me of going to the symphony where I am primed to hear the world's greatest music and find myself nodding off, much to my wife's and my embarrassment. She keeps poking me hoping it will prevent me from falling out of my chair or snoring. How do I account for this?

I can think of several possibilities. My true nature as an uncultured barbarian has finally shown through my carefully-crafted veneer and I can no longer disguise it. Applied to Peter and the rest, this theory would suggest that they are fishermen, after all, and all this high-powered spender has fallen on inert soil, so to speak. They can't take in the majesty, complexity, simplicity and sheer breadth of what is happening before them and so just shut down.

Or maybe climbing this mountain with Jesus has utterly exhausted them and they can't keep themselves from collapsing now that they have made it to the top. But what would be Luke's intention in mentioning that? We go on.

"As the two men were about to leave Jesus, Peter said to him, 'Master, it's good that we're here. We should construct three shrines: one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.'" At this point the commentator inserts, "but he didn't know what he was saying." So first, the disciples can't stay awake during the Transfiguration and now Peter wants to build three shrines to the men he sees before him and then the commentator says Peter is blowing smoke.

"At that very moment, while Peter is still speaking, a cloud overshadowed them. As they entered the cloud, they were overcome with awe." They aren't sleepy now! Adrenalin is

pouring into their bodies and everything in them wants to run. They are encountering the cloud Moses went into. They are on the mountain that shook under Elijah before God told Elijah to listen to the still small voice; the quiet voice of majesty, mercy and love.

“Then a voice from the cloud said, ‘This is my Son, my chosen one. Listen to him!’” The experience has broken through the disciple’s sleepiness defense and they are forced to feel the powerful self-disclosure of God. “This is my Son!” the voice says. Can there be any doubt about whom he is talking? “My chosen One,” the one chosen to reveal the character of God, chosen to go to Jerusalem, chosen to show us a way out of our self-destroying dilemma. “Listen to him!” the voice commands. Can it be any clearer as to whom we are to listen to?

“Even as the voice spoke, Jesus was found alone.” Moses and Elijah have vanished and the disciples are left with Jesus alone. No tabernacles, no shrines, no distractions that point back to great men and what those men did to achieve greatness, often veiling the truth. Only Jesus who eight days earlier had told his disciples for the first time that he would be going to Jerusalem where he would suffer, be rejected, killed and on the third day raised.

“The disciples were speechless and at the time told no one what they had seen.” They were like me listening to simple, complex and beautiful classical music with no way to process it. They are like Paul encountering Jesus on the road to Damascus and then taking three years to think through what it meant. Back to the text.

“The next day, when Jesus, Peter, John, and James had come down from the mountain, a large crowd met Jesus. A man from the crowd shouted, ‘Teacher, I beg you to take a look at my son, my only child. Look, a spirit seizes him and, without any warning, he screams. It shakes him and causes him to foam at the mouth. It tortures him and rarely leaves him alone. I begged your disciples to throw it out, but they couldn’t.’”

What is the spirit that seizes the boy? Why aren’t the disciples able to cast it out? When Luke speaks of evil spirits or a demon that possesses, it’s his way of pointing to the influence of other people’s voices active in the possessed. We are a network of relationships; some past, some present, that live inside us, each with their own voice. These voices begin outside us as the voices of other people and groups but we forgot their origin and think they came from within. The voices are multiple, differing and often speaking at the same time. They present a cacophony of sound making it impossible for us to decide what to think or do. If the conflict is severe as it was with this boy, this spirit tortures him and rarely leaves him alone. Luke and the gospels, being pre-scientific, know something that modern science is only beginning to discover. They correctly intuit a connection between our bodies and our relationships.

“Jesus answered ‘You faithless and crooked generation, how long will I be with you and put up with you?’” Jesus addresses the whole crowd, disciples included, calling them “faithless” and “crooked”. He calls them “faithless” because they don’t have a center to their faith. If who I am is my relationship with you and all the others that form me; my family, my peers, my history, my enemies, my country and my God or whatever substitutes for that; how do I organize the conflicting voices? How do I determine which voice takes precedence? When we are “faithless” we are at the whim of whatever voice screams the loudest since we have no way to sort it out.

The voice from the cloud says “This is my Son, my chosen one. Listen to him!” This gives us the missing center. When a community listens to the Lord of Life, they have a way to sort.

Why then does Jesus say this generation is crooked? Somehow that boy with the demon serves as a scapegoat. Humans have always hidden their scapegoats from themselves and that’s why Jesus describes them as “crooked”. We don’t want to see the way everything is built on someone being excluded. This is the veil Paul speaks of when he writes “a veil lies over their hearts. But whenever someone turns back to the Lord, the veil is removed.” The crucifixion removed the veil revealing the mechanism that before that had been entirely hidden. Jesus asks “how long will I be with you and put up with you?” The answer is he will be with them and have to put up with this until after the crucifixion. We continue.

“Bring your son here.” While he was coming, the demon threw him down and shook him violently.” A voice inside the boy, a voice that came from some source in the boy’s network of relationships, a voice that was at odds with what was best for the boy, took possession of his body, threw him down and shook him violently. (I am not saying all mental illness has its source here. There definitely is an organic and genetic component to some mental illness. St. Luke would not have been able to distinguish which was what.)

“Jesus spoke harshly to the unclean spirit.” Voices that do not want what is best for us are deeply embedded. They don’t take kindly to being exposed and so Jesus speaks harshly. It’s a harshness to match the harshness revealed by the cross. Jesus healed the child and gave him back to his father. “Everyone was overwhelmed by God’s greatness.”