

“Glorious Mystery”

2 Kings 2: 1-12, Mark 9: 2-9

Transfiguration Sunday/B, February 26, 2006

Lynne M. Dolan

Under the entry “mysticism” in Frederick Buechner’s *Wishful Thinking* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1973), he contends, “mysticism is where religion starts. . . . Religion as ethics, institution, dogma, ritual, Scripture, social action, all of this comes later, and in the long run probably counts for less. Religions start, as Frost said poems do, with a lump in the throat—to put it mildly—or with a bush going up in flames, rain of flowers, a dove coming out of the sky.” (p, 65)

The event we heard described today in Mark’s gospel—Jesus shining with light on a mountaintop—would qualify as such a religion-starting mystical experience. Peter, James and John go with Jesus, not because they expected something mystical to happen, but because they felt honored simply to be invited. Given their frenetic schedule, they likely welcomed some time away from the others. Half-asleep and blurry eyed they wake up in time to see Jesus shimmering in a bright light, speaking to none other than Moses and Elijah. The prophets disappear and in a loud voice God proclaims: “This is my Son, marked by my love. Listen to him.”

Peter wants to preserve the moment, and so, without thinking to slow him down, he suggests they build three booths to commemorate the event. You can hear his impassioned plea now, “step right up, ladies and gentlemen, to witness the miracle of all miracles. Jesus conversing with none other than Elijah and Moses.!” Even if Peter’s suggestion seems ridiculous, it’s an understandable feeling, wanting to hold on to something so extraordinary. He and the other disciples had been slogging along with Jesus for some time now. Undoubtedly they had seen some amazing things, yet they’d also been through some tough times together. In fact, just before their journey up the mountain Jesus warned the disciples that the “Son of Man must suffer and die.” The prospect of remaining on that mountaintop was far more inviting than making their way toward Jesus’ impending death.

After the light fades and the voice stops, Mark tells us, “they see nothing but Jesus, only Jesus.”(v. 8) From the heights of the extraordinary they quickly return to the ordinary. Jesus is alone, just as he was before they slipped off asleep, the regular old Jesus whom they have come to know both personally

and intimately. The moment passes. The mystery fades. They are left to wonder if it were only a dream or a figment of their imagination. However, it was not a dream. It was as real as it gets. For those with eyes to see, ears to hear, and a heart to discern what lies behind the mystery, it was a sign of things to come. Jesus instructs them to tell no one what they have seen. If it were not real, would he have sworn them to silence?

The word “transfiguration” is defined as “a change of form or appearance.” It sounds like one of those twenty cent theological words that have nothing to do with you or me. However, transfiguration is something we all may experience if we are open to it. Could you identify a moment in your life when you felt as though you were changed by the mystery of God’s presence? Has there been an experience where you felt that lump in the throat that Buechner talks about? We long for such moments and are often jealous of others who can describe such an experience. Naming a moment of transfiguration may be like the allusive sense of “calling” we spoke of not so long ago. If we think transfiguration only happens when we hear a booming voice from heaven or the bright light breaking into our darkness, we may never have such an experience. According to Paul, most of us never recognize such moments because we live most of the time with a kind of veil over things. However, sometimes when we do pay attention, and sometimes even when we don’t, the veil is lifted, and we see past the surface to the depth of things. If only for a moment, there is that change of form or appearance that gives us a glimpse of the truth.

One thing the disciples teach us is that we can not live our lives on the mountaintop. Such mystical events inform our faith and enrich our journeys, but we can not take up residence there. Move on. Hurry back to the real world where the real work of discipleship takes place. However, the disciples also teach us something else in this story. They remind us that our lives can not be transformed if we are not willing to stand in the midst of the Holy, the mystical, the magical, the mysterious wonder of God. If those disciples did not say yes to Jesus’ invitation, they would never have been witnesses to that mystery. Reflect on your own life. How do you feel about the word “Holy”? Do you wish you had more experiences where you felt as though you were in the presence of God? Or are you quick to assume you don’t have time for such things? When someone invites you to take a risk, to go somewhere you have never been before do you have your bags already packed or are you panic stricken? I give the disciples a lot of credit.

Everything they did and everywhere they went was uncharted territory and they went willingly, again and again.

This is not just a story about personal transformation. It speaks to us as the church, as the body of Christ in the world today. God has the power to make all things new, especially the body of Christ, whenever we have the courage to embrace the unknown and trust that God is there with us. We have so little control over what will happen. Therefore, instead of worrying about what we can not control, Jesus invites us to embrace the mystery. This is not about finding the right answers to all the right questions. It is not about preaching the perfect sermon or leading the most enriching Bible study. Those things are important, but there is more to our faith. Our lives are transfigured when allow ourselves to remain in the presence of the indescribable, unattainable mystery of God. Those moments may be far more rare, but much more powerful.

I agree with Wendell Berry, “it’s a difficult business, being human.” We know all too well how Peter feels. We are uncomfortable with something mysterious, so instead we think we need to do something. As faithful disciples, there are times when we *shouldn’t* just stand there, we *should* do something; there are other times when we *shouldn’t just do* something, we should stand there, or maybe more appropriately kneel there. This would be one of the latter. Out of the cloud the voice of God reveals something essential to us, “this is my Son, the Beloved, listen to him.” However, we have a hard time listening. We move so quickly to trying to figure things out. We find meaning, purpose and worth in our doing. Most of our life is filled with doing. However, this is a time for being.

The trouble is that we don’t easily give ourselves permission to linger, to soak up the mystery, to be swallowed up and transformed by it. We think lingering is a luxury instead of that which is the very essence of our faith. Jesus isn’t shushing us away, but rather invites us to linger, to relish, to soak it all in, to tremble, to wonder, to worship. He says, “come with me to the mountaintop. Come and stand with me in the presence of the holy, awesome, mysterious and unconditioned God who alone is God.” Will you come?

Jesus wanted his disciples to do more than mimic his behavior and live righteous, ethically sound lives. He needed them to realize they were worthy of being in the presence of God. When mystery confronts us,

drawing us up short, it is often when we least expect it. When the disciples went up the mountain to pray they were not expecting to glimpse the mystery of the Incarnation. How many times had they been with Jesus, praying, healing, serving, feeding, and nothing like this had ever happened. Kimberlee Ireton says, “while we cannot force an encounter with mystery, we can be open to receiving one. We can learn to pay attention, especially in the midst of those daily tasks we do so often that they become rote and mindless. It is in the quotidian—the everyday, the commonplace—that mystery most often enfolds as it did for the disciples who were trying to pray. For it is in the mundane and the ordinary that we live out the bulk of our lives and thus where we have the most opportunity to notice mystery, to encounter it, and to be encountered by it.”

How might you be present to the holy, the mysterious, the awe-inspiring wonder of God this Lenten season? Remember, you don’t have to go to the mountaintop to experience the mystery of God. God is likely to meet you when you least expect it. God will not likely speak in a booming voice from heaven, but in the thundering silence. Will you hear God? Can you hear God? As with any grace, we can not force or demand such a vision. Ireton says we can only wait for it, expectantly and hopefully, as we engage in the relationships and work that constitute our lives. For “in this waiting, we dimly sense the realm beyond the veil. But, occasionally, the veil moves and we see more fully, more truly, more real-ly, than we usually do. These glimpses are what sustain us, filling us with hope that, ultimately, all will be well.”

It is as if, like the disciples, we are half-asleep until something mysterious and wonderful stirs us from our slumber. As we awaken, may we fall to our knees and worship the One who is the source of true wonder and delight. You never know. You may be caught short by something as simple as four robins dancing in our backyard on a blustery, February morning. You never know how or where you will experience that magical lump in your throat.

What the disciples witnessed on that mountaintop was what Buechner describes as “holiness shining through humanness.” It is one way to describe the transfiguration, but it also characterizes the whole of the gospel of Jesus. Be aware, after all, at any moment, we all might experience in one another “holiness shining through humanness.”

As we begin our Lenten journey, I leave with us these two questions, “where do we now, in our common life, see the mysteries of God’s making? And will we dare live from the power of what we see?” May such revelations be sacred food for our journeys! Amen

Sources:

Kimberlee Conway Ireton, “Waking to Mystery,” Weavings, Vol XXI, Number 1, January/February 2006, p.p.18-22.

Stephen V. Doughty, “Mystery and Institutional Rebirth,” Weavings, Vol XXI, Number 1, January/February 2006, p.p.23-29.

Richard Rollefson, “Preaching on the Transfiguration,” Lutheran School of Theology and Mission, 2002.