

“Lord, It Is Good for Us to Be Here”

Matthew 17:1-9

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Every year, on the Sunday before Lent, the lectionary takes us to the mountain top story known as The Transfiguration. The story is laced with mystery and with other-worldly dimensions. For example, the three disciples witness a strange huddling of personalities from the past and the present. Moses, Elijah, and Jesus are seen huddled together as if they are having a family reunion. Though centuries separate each of them, chronologically, here they are huddled and friendly as if they had graduated in the same high school class. On this mountain top, there is a suspension of time and space.

The three disciples see this mysterious scene unfolding and they have no clue what it all means. They are awed by it but lack for any meaningful interpretation of it. Finally, one of them blurts out loud, “Lord, it is good for us to be here.” (I hope everyone can identify with this moment.) They don’t know where to begin to understand what they are witnessing, but they have enough on the ball to know that paying attention is a very good idea. The understanding may come later. I am trusting that we’ve all had these kinds of experiences.

My imagination takes me to Boston Harbor in the year 1775. Some pedestrians happen along the wharf and witness something rather queer. A band of strangely dressed patriots are slashing open crates of tea and dumping the tea into the night waters. From a safe distance they watch for several minutes. They have never seen such a sight before; have no idea how to understand this midnight raid, but know, intuitively that it is a good thing they are there as witnesses. Understanding will come later.

In the case of the Transfiguration story, Peter, James and John won't understand what they have witnessed on the mountain top until after the Crucifixion and after the Resurrection. It is only with Easter eyes that they'll be able to see the significance of this mysterious huddling of Moses, Elijah, and Jesus. In the moment, all they can do is to fall to the ground and tremble in great fear; the understanding will come in due time.

This morning, I want to affirm the importance of this notion of being in the presence of mystery, being in the presence of the divine without being able to name it for what it is, but trusting its meaning will be revealed one day.

This week I watched for about the tenth time the film made in 1965 of the turning of our church building from facing High Street to facing Main Street. There is footage of a brief ceremony and there is footage of the actual lifting and rolling and inching the meeting house to its present location. Lots of people were there watching. One person, Bob Erf, had the presence of mind to show up with an 8 mm movie camera! There is no way in the world he or any one of them could have understood fully what this Herculean action would mean down the road, they just believed they were doing what God had asked of them, that they were witnessing God's Spirit doing a new thing, and that the meaning of it all would unfold in due time. If I listen now, with all my might, I can hear those South Church members standing across the street saying, "Lord, it is well that we are here." I suspect there were even a few who fell to the ground trembling in great fear.

I believe Robert Frost had this truth in mind when he wrote his poem, *The Pasture*. Listen for the invitation to stand in the mystery.

I'm going out to clean the pasture spring;
I'll only stop to rake the leaves away
(And wait to watch the water clear, I may):
I sha'n't be gone long. – You come too.

I'm going out to fetch the little calf
That's standing by the mother. It's so young,
It totters when she licks it with her tongue.
I sha'n't be gone long. – You come too.

Do you hear the poet's invitation to come along and stand in the mystery? I picture a grandchild watching bug-eyed as the cow licks her calf with her tongue. The child nearly trembles; has no idea of the meaning of it all; but looks up at the grandparent as if to say, 'it is good that we are here.' The meaning will unfold in God's time.

Another poet, a South Glastonbury poet, Hugh Ogden, takes us to a mountainous, rural road in his poem, *Night Driving*. He invites the reader to stand over by the guard rail and witness a heart-stopping scene; not necessarily to understand it right away, but to stand in the mystery of it. In this poem, a driver sees a rabbit in the illumination of the car headlights, tries to avoid hitting the animal, but hears and feels the dread thud of the tire. The driver proceeds a short distance, then stops and turns around and returns to the scene of the death. The man opens the trunk, takes old newspaper, carefully wraps the carcass, and gingerly carries it to the roadside where he finds a sharp stone, digs a shallow grave, and buries the furry creature. The reader of the poem witnesses a night time driver discovering the mystery of what life is all about: to care lovingly for another of God's creations. I have read this poem a dozen times now, and I am just beginning to find my own language for naming what life is all about.

When I read the Hugh Ogden poem, *Night Driving*, I feel like those disciples; Peter, James and John, standing in the presence of a great mystery, believing its meaning will be revealed to me in God's time. I see the man burying the rabbit, and I want to say aloud, 'Lord, it is well that I am here.'

So, today we come to the communion table. Like the Transfiguration story, the bread and the cup present us with a great mystery and also with an invitation simply to stand in this mystery; no need to understand it fully. It is the mystery of God's redeeming love that we witness here at the table. It is no mystery what happens when we step into the shower with soap and shampoo. We emerge all clean on the outside, all traces of sweat and dirt washed away. But how is it that in the breaking of the bread and the pouring of the cup; how is it that in the eating and the drinking of the communion meal God's love washes away all that has been the source of our shame? My guess is that we will never fully grasp this truth, but that in our daily living, in the course of our many relationships, on the mountain tops or in the valleys or somewhere in between, we will be participants in the redeeming power of love. We may not be able to find words to describe it or musical notes to sing it, but with those early disciples we will be wise enough to blurt out loud, "Lord, it is good for us to be here.' This I say in the greatest of hope, Amen.