

The Things We Don't Know

February 3, 2008

As you can read in the order of worship Liz's chosen title for her sermon was "The Things We Don't Know." I didn't talk to Liz about her title, so one of things that I don't know is just where she was headed. For me, the Transfiguration of Jesus left me thinking about how the magnificent light of that moment is carried forth and what it might inspire in us. The text that depicts the Transfiguration of Jesus is always read on the Sunday before Lent begins; it is this timing that allows us to see Jesus literally in all his glory. The transfiguration moment is a depiction of Jesus that is meant to offer insight and hope for the difficult path that lies ahead for the faithful who will journey with Jesus toward the Garden of Gethsemane. There is no doubt that the lessons of the coming weeks will be intellectually and spiritually difficult to contend with; for even when we consider the celebratory nature of Easter, the journey that Jesus takes—which culminates with him hanging on the cross—is still horrible to consider. But before we enter into Lent the transfiguration story gives us one more glorious reminder of who Jesus is and why the journey that is about to unfold before us is necessary—for Jesus and for us as his followers.

The Transfiguration offers us a moment to consider the great depths of faith to which we are called as followers of Jesus. Following the trajectory of the life of Jesus is not easy, but the transfiguration offers us proof of the odd and difficult things that we might see on the way as we follow Jesus. The writer Annie Dillard says this about the idea of following Jesus:

"Does anyone have the foggiest idea of what sort of power we so 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 just to kill a Sunday morning. It is madness to wear ladies' straw hats and velvet gloves 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." ¹

Hidden amid the poetry and humor of her prose Dillard has offered a profound indictment of the liberal theology that drives many of us to say, "I'm not too sure of this story or that story in the bible, but I like what Jesus has to say about X (the poor, the needy, etc) and so I will follow Jesus—even with my doubts." But our transfiguration story seems to be calling to do more than simply line up to follow Jesus. Instead the transfiguration story asks us to come to faith willing to put on our crash helmets: for our faith in Jesus will take us into some strange, difficult, and even dangerous places—and God will be there with us for our journey!

The transfiguration story is a story that inspires disbelief. Today we see disbelief manifested in contemporary critics of faith such as Christopher Hitchens and Richard Dawkins; but the truth is that skeptics of faith have been around for many generations. In his *Life of Nero*, Suetonius who lived from 75–160 CE, derided Christians as "a set of men adhering to a novel and mischievous superstition. In his *Annals*, Tacitus who lived somewhere between 60–120 CE is known to have sneered at the "pernicious superstitions" of believers."² So the transfiguration story could simply be the golden invitation to join with the famous disbelievers of our time and the skeptics of ancient days. We could say, "This is the one that finally does it. I can't believe any of this!" But, rather than go down that road

I believe that this story is a brilliant one of connection—between the story of our Jewish ancestors and our Christian faith. Just as both Moses and Elijah were known to have been taken into heaven without dying, the transfiguration likewise takes Jesus into heaven as he stands atop that mountain. He goes there for but a few moments; but in this depiction Jesus is placed in line with those ancient prophets and we are reminded that he comes not as an anomaly from God—but as the next, and for us as Christians, as the preeminent prophet who exemplifies the power of God’s love and possibility.

That is what we must hear on this Sunday before we enter into Lent: that the journey we are about to embark upon is not one of spiritual flagellation—but is, instead, a journey that will take us, together with Jesus, toward both the horrors of the cross and the culminating glory of the resurrection of Jesus. The transfiguration of Jesus is merely a sneak preview of what is to become of Jesus. When Peter, James, and John see Jesus transfigured atop that mountain, when they hear the voice of God booming this is my son with whom I am well-pleased—listen to him!” they are unable to fully grasp the meaning of what they have witnessed. This is the moment when they begin to grasp that “this Jesus whom the disciples followed was not just an itinerant rabbi, a clever sage, a socio-political provocateur, a subversive wisdom teacher, or a failed apocalyptic troublemaker. The transfiguration portrays Jesus as the Cosmic Lord of all human history. He is God's beloved and specially anointed Son.”³ With the time and distance that the bible offers us, we are able to come to this story with new eyes and encounter it with our crash helmets safely affixed so that we might faithfully step forward into a faith that asks us, too, to listen to him, and to follow him onto a path that will culminate in the cross.

I am currently reading Sherman Alexie’s newest book, titled *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*. In this novel Alexie’s protagonist wrestles with his role on the reservation, a place he refers to simply as ‘the rez.’ The protagonist, named Junior, longs to be transformed or, perhaps, transfigured from who he is into something or someone else. In a particularly comical scene he notes that he leaves “the rez” for school in the eastern Washington community of Reardon, only to notice that the Reardon mascot is the Indian. So he left “the rez” only to once again be confronted with his basic identity. Junior cannot escape his “Indian” roots, even as he escapes the reservation every time he heads off to school. This reality is telling I think because it reminds us all that we cannot escape who we are. And, as Christians, we might like to escape the journey we call Lent, and perhaps many of us would rather not visit Jesus while he carries his cross; but Lent and the 40 day journey toward Easter is a part of who we are. We cannot be transfigured away from our story because we need this part of our story so that we might be transformed by the Good News of the Easter resurrection. This story is an ancient one, and it is a contemporary one that we are called to live together during Lent.

And that is ultimately what is so dramatic about the transfiguration story and the Jesus story as a whole: that the life and ministry of Jesus calls each one of us to be willing to be God’s prophets in contemporary times. Peter would have had Jesus reside there on the mountainside forever; and I suspect that, if we are honest about how we feel about the path that Jesus will walk during Lent, we would also prefer that Jesus set himself up in Peter’s tent on that mountaintop and forget all the rest that will leave us mourning together on Good Friday. But Peter doesn’t understand that the story must continue so that Jesus can fully reach the glory of God that is required of him. It also must continue so that we can reach the full glory of God that is required of us. As Jesus, Peter, James, and John descend

from that mountain-top experience we are called up to the mountain top—to take our place as God's prophets.

The light of the transfiguration that remains—the one that continues to shine—is the light that is in us. And so I wonder how specifically we are being called to make the glory of God manifest in our world? The transfiguration of Jesus must lead to us being transfigured: transfigured from the ones who are comfortable and quiet into ones that glow with the glory of God's justice. The transfiguration of Jesus is a call to be transfigured away from the “business as usual” ways that too often dominate, into hopeful and passionate people who take ridiculous risks simply because the gospel calls us to do so. The transfiguration of Jesus is a call to raise your voice—even when it cracks in fear—against the realities of poverty and disease, against the soul-destroying power of torture, warfare, and violence; against culturally-supported discrimination; against systems that value stock prices over consumer need and ecological hope. The transfiguration of Jesus is the moment when Peter, James, and John recognized who exactly Jesus was; and for us it is the moment when we are called to recognize who exactly we are.

As for the things I don't know: ask my daughter Grace. She can probably give you a long list! However, what I do know is that the glory and the light of the transfiguration of Jesus has not been extinguished; it is all around us; and it calls us to an active faith. Grab your crash helmets, make sure your seat belts are on and your tray tables are in their upright and locked positions, because our work has just begun. Our lesson tells us that Jesus was transfigured atop that mountain, but we are the ones who continue to be transformed and transfigured. And God's world is aching for us to transfigure and transform everything around us so that the glory of that moment will continue during the 40 days of Lent AND forever more. Thanks be to God. Amen!

¹ Dillard, Annie. “Teaching a Stone to Talk.”, New York: Harper and Row, 1982

² Clendenin, Daniel. “journeywithjesus.com...a weekly webzine for the local church,” <http://www.journeywithjesus.net/Essays/20080128JJ.shtml>

³ Ibid.