

“Appreciating the Mystery “ Luke 9:28-36 Transfiguration March '18 @ Hope

Reflecting on this text, my mind was drawn back to the experience I had some years ago when I had the privilege participating in a tour of Greece, called **Footsteps of Paul**. We went to Corinth, Philippi, Thessalonika etc. For me, the most memorable experience was **worshipping at the Orthodox Cathedral in Athens**, a magnificent structure. The service lasted several hours and it was all chanted, a capella, by a choir of black-robed, bearded priests. Other priests, resplendently garbed in vestments went through their elaborate rituals at a magnificent altar, surrounded by scores of candles, gold Eucharistic vessels, and pungent incense. Every inch of the walls of the cathedral was covered with icons, richly painted or in mosaic tile, which told the story of the Bible..beginning with the Garden of Eden, the Exodus, the birth and baptism of Jesus, his miracles, the Transfiguration, Calvary's cross and the empty tomb, the Ascension.. There were no hymns sung, precious little congregational participation. The sermon lasted about five minutes. The whole experience was clearly designed not to instruct but to reinforce the sense of wonder, mystery and awe. The worshipers were simply to contemplate the lofty majesty of God and the wonder of God becoming man in Jesus Christ.

I am not at all tempted to trade our Lutheran way of worship for that experience, but it did set me to **thinking about the difficulty our rational, pragmatic world has with things that are mysterious and transcendental**, things we can't explain and the nature of worship.. Today our text encourages us to struggle with a well-known but rather troubling account of a supernatural experience.. the mind-boggling Transfiguration of Jesus.

Someone has suggested that we look at the Transfiguration the way a fly, walking on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel, looks at the art of Michelangelo. We just can't take it all in. All this whiteness and brightness, the conversation with persons long dead and gone, the voice from heaven and the cloud.. It confounds all us good left-brain, linear thinkers who so quickly become cynical about things we can't understand. We are so good at building computers and satellites, we send a sports car to Mars, but what do we do with mystery? Can we simply acknowledge it? Celebrate it? Even long for the experience of it? Or must we always strive to explain it, and diminish it, or if we can't do that, simply ignore it. Peter couldn't take it all in. He begins to talk before his brain is engaged, as he so often did. He wants to build a tent. He wants to make it last. Partly, I suspect, so that he could try to figure it out. But the Lord tells him to simply let it rumble around in his mind. Don't even talk about it. Don't try to explain it.

This would have been an unnecessary warning in our time. A few years ago Morton Kelsey did a survey among Roman Catholic laypeople and discovered that a great many of them had some kind of mystical, life-changing experience but had never told anyone about it. You know the reason. They didn't want anyone to think they were crazy. Our world doesn't want to acknowledge the transcendental. The only good mystery is a mystery solved.

**There is a tension here, of course.** We all owe a great debt to the probing, inquisitive, fact-driven, rational minds of scientists. No one wishes for the church to stumble again into superstition, or the foolishness of arguing for a flat earth, or a three-tiered universe. We are infinitely grateful that modern medicine has unlocked many of the mysteries of how our bodies function. We count such knowledge a gift of God. But *we must also learn to celebrate*

*the world which will never be probed with a microscope. If God is God, if he is Creator and we creatures, then all his ways and wonders will never be comprehended by the human mind. Is this not what it means for us to worship? Is this not why we get on our knees? Who are we to stand before the wonder and mystery of the Almighty?*

It saddens me that **modern language** has essentially abandoned the primary meaning of the word "**awe**." The dictionary defines awesome as something which induces an *overwhelming feeling of reverence, admiration or fear*." Nowadays, anything and everything is "awesome" . If a peanut-butter and jelly sandwich is awesome then nothing is really awesome.

Too often I think we come to church as though we had pads and pencils to record the lessons for life. This is where we learn how to deal with our self-centeredness, our racism, our impatience. Give us a lecture, preacher, help us understand and improve our behavior. I've heard people say *they come to church to find out where they went wrong and get help to live a better life.*"

I guess this is OK up to a point, **but I pray to God there are some moments when we are lifted up and beyond our cognitive processes**, when we stop analyzing our behavior and evaluating the performance, and stop thinking of worship as some sort of group therapy. I pray to God there are moments when a bright light shines in our hearts and we sense the presence of Christ, the warmth of His love, an awareness of a peace that passes all human understanding. This is not something we can explain or even try to explain. God help us if we experience this hour as simply a time of instruction, or God forbid, entertainment. I've often wondered what people mean when they say they "enjoyed" the service. Is this the way Peter, James and John would have described their mountaintop experience? Enjoyable?

In going back and reading some of the sermons I have written and preached on this Transfiguration text I was struck by how much I focused on what one might call the "cognitive elements" of the text. Things like the connection between Moses and Elijah, both of whom experienced great "*show-down moments*", Moses and his confrontation with the Pharaoh, "*Let my people go!*" Elijah confronting the prophets of Baal and the wicked Queen Jezebel. Then both of them being translated beyond this life without the normal experience of death..Elijah being transported by the chariot of fire, and Moses simply taken by God from Mt. Nebo..All this, of course, **relates strongly to Jesus** as he anticipates his great show-down with the Jewish religious establishment and the authorities of Rome...His crucifixion and then resurrection.. and the connection with his Baptism where he first heard the affirming word, "This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased." And now hears it again as he goes down the mountain to Jerusalem...

And then, of course, we **make the connection to our own lives**, reminding ourselves that we also have difficult confrontational moments.. and we will also journey down the mountain and experience this thing called death. In Christ, we find strength and assurance and connect to our own Baptism where God assures us that we are his beloved sons and daughters..

There is nothing at all wrong with this approach. Scripture is written for our learning, and we are supposed to work ourselves into these texts so that we can be directed and comforted in our spiritual pilgrimage.

But it strikes me that this is also **the way we typically handle things we can't explain**. We find a way to draw a lesson from it but we find it difficult to simply allow ourselves to be transported into an experience of awe, wonder and praise.

What I'm striving to say here is that in the long run the important thing is not to have a neatly arranged theological system through which we try to explain the questions of life or find the directions for a happy life..**the important thing is simply to have Jesus, to hold onto Jesus in the mystery of faith**..to know Jesus as the truly awesome, life-giving evidence of God's amazing love and grace..the One whose life, death and resurrection guarantees to us the wonder of an eternity in the everlasting arms of God...to be left on our knees in awe, wonder and worship.

To view the **Transfiguration this way is to see it entirely as Gospel**, Good News, that God is willing to come from heaven to earth below and grant us moments when heaven and earth are connected. We cannot understand or explain this, but it fills us with a deep confidence that there is more to our lives than all our struggles and troubles. It reminds us that we too shall be drawn to the high and holy mountain by the mercies of the living God. We too shall see him face to face with a glory and a splendor that is indescribable. Our mundane, sin-encumbered lives will be transformed and transfigured because we have Jesus.

On this **Wednesday the Church comes down from the Mount of Transfiguration** and joins our Lord on his rigorous journey up the next mountain, the one called Calvary. **We call it Lent**, and it is a good journey, a sacred journey, but it also humbles us, making us deeply aware of our human flaws and our mortality.." *Dust thou art, and to dust thou shalt return..*" it is not an easy journey.

All the more reason for us to **cling to this Transfiguration moment...** to be lifted up and transported to a realm that we cannot understand or explain, and simply worship, celebrate and give thanks for this glimpse of the mystery of God's glory and his forgiving love. Amen.