

Don't Say a Word Until After Easter

Matthew 17:1-9

This morning we have a story that comes up every year in the lectionary readings. It is a transitional story meant to punctuate the end of the season of Epiphany where we focus on stories that reveal to us who Jesus is. The story also functions to prepare us for beginning of Lent which begins this week on Ash Wednesday. It is the perfect story to help us make this transition. As a dramatic end to the season of Epiphany we are given a clear affirmation of who Jesus is and what he is about. If you have ever wondered why God does not just write out the truth for us to see it up in the sky, this is as much as you could ask for. Jesus is transfigured, the two most important ancient figures in the Jewish faith affirm him, and the voice of God from a cloud command the disciples to listen to Jesus, the son. As a scripture placed just before Lent our journey with Jesus to Jerusalem and the cross, we are given an assurances that we can trust him in the painful and confusing days ahead.

So this is not a reading I have every avoided speaking on. Not that I like speaking on it. I do not. The story is too much for me. It is indescribable. I never once felt fully satisfied with my attempts to explain it and somehow shape a relevant message from it. This is not a story many of us can easily relate to anything we have experienced.

My preaching professor, Fred Craddock, mercifully told me when I was his student preaching my first sermon that I had bit off more than I could chew by daring to preach on Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac. Some stories are beyond explanation. This week I found a sermon on the transfiguration by Dr. Craddock in which he reminds us that there are some stories in scripture that we, like the disciples, are not ready to hear and cannot fully understand. Turn the pages of scripture and there will be times when you will be invited by the story to step in the pages of scripture and experience for yourself what is going on. Like the people in that story you may find yourself bewildered, disturbed and conversely loved, transformed, willed with awe and wonder.

"Do not let your hearts be troubled, don't let them be afraid. Believe in God and also in me. In my Father's house there are many rooms, if it were not so would I have told you that I go to prepare a place with you." Can you hear how tender, how loving, how personal Jesus' words are for his disciples? Jesus is attempting to break to them the terribly, painful news of his departure. He wants much to reassure and comfort them. If you decide to enter that intimate space with the disciples you can feel the love Jesus has for you. And you can also feel the confusion and distress of being one of his disciples. We all know how hard it is to say goodbye.

Remember when the disciples set out in a boat to cross the sea of Galilee while Jesus remained behind to pray? A storm blew up: wind roaring, lightening flashing, waves crashing into the boat and the disciples desperately doing everything they can to keep it afloat and not die. Then in all this confusing a ghostly figure approaching walking on the water. Can you imagine yourself in that moment in that boat experiencing and seeing what they see? Jesus commanding and calming the water and they are flooded with a sense of awe and wonder and terror as they realize the power of Jesus. It is almost too much to handle to be there and take in what has happened.

We also have experiences in our lives where we find it difficult to handle and work through. Some of them painful experience and other experience of wonder and beauty and awe. Either way it can be too much. I think of the time I once attended, an orchestra performance of the Vivaldi's Four Seasons with a good friend. Never had I heard music so full of beauty and emotion. I could feel the chill of winter, the thawing and freshness of spring, and the warmth of the hot summer sun. Afterwards we were sitting in the car ready to leave and I start going on and on about the performance how wonderful it was. My friend becomes increasingly frustrated with me and finally bursts out, "Can you please be quiet? I am still hear the music being playing in my mind and your ruining it for me."

I recall the time I in the Smoky Mountains the week after Christmas with my friend Bob Barber. We hike high in the mountains and we are camping in about a half foot of snow on bitter cold winter night. The night after Christmas leave our campsite to hike up to the bald mountains top where we have a 360 degree view of the mountains. The full moon is shining brightly and illuminating flocked, snow caked tree and hills which are all glistening as far as the eyes can see. As we are standing there several deer ever so carefully looking us in the eyes walking towards us and they come so close we feel we can reach out and touch them. It is almost more than I can take in. It linger still within me.

In our scripture this morning, we are invited to join Peter, James, and John as they go up a mountain with Jesus. We are given an experience of revelation for which we can never be fully prepared to receive. Jesus is transfigured and standing next to him are the two greatest figures in the Jewish faith, Moses and Elijah. The curtain is lifted and there is the dazzling splendor of the Transfiguration and a voice speaks in the clearest affirmation that could ever be given, "This is my beloved Son; listen to him." The disciples do not know what to do anymore than we do. There is no experience in their life that can prepare them for this. Peter awkward talks gibberish about setting up tents. They are out of their element. The experience is overwhelming.

You might wonder why they don't understand. Why the confusing? Are they so dense as not to see and understand? Don't they know their Jewish scriptures? Can't they put all the clues together? On a mountain top. Moses is there. A transfigured Jesus. Dazzling light. Coming down from the mountain top. How could they fail to remember the story of Moses going up the mountain and being transfigured after meeting with God and then coming down the mountain with the Ten Commandments?¹

But Jesus understands and does not chastise them. He says a phrase that is worth our considering this morning: "Don't worry about talking about this anytime soon. In fact, do not say a word to anyone about this until after Easter." Jesus understands that this experience is much for them. It is an experience that needs to rest in their consciousness for a time. It is meant to be pondered, not explained away. It would leave them shaking and terrified.

There are times in our life when we so much want to have it all figured out and resolved. We become accustomed to simple solutions and pat answers for experiences we cannot easily resolve. Surely the answer is on the web! There has to be a simple solution to this. Maybe the right words to restore my relationship. Maybe a new miracle drug to make my life normal again. We may wonder, "Why can I not work this through and just move on?" But there are experiences that leave us dazed and confused. The experience will not let us go and it lives on in us. Maybe it is the last moments you spend with a loved one who is dying and words cannot express the pain and the loss. Or maybe it comes in a time of great failure when you don't know how you are going to recover. Or it is not a time of tragedy but the wonder and awe and grace, of experiences that in some sense are miraculous and forever changing us. Whatever the experience, there is no escaping them.

We are like the proverbial man who found himself stuck and sinking in quick sand. He screams for help but no one comes. He begins to pray as he is slowly sinking deeper. All of a sudden he sees the Buddha standing on the edge of the quick sand. He is so relieved. The Buddha reaches out to the man and before he pushes the man's head under he says, "Not out, but through." There are many things in this life that we do not get out of; we have to go through them and it takes time.

Fred Craddock talks, in that sermon I noted, about going to a tiny school on the French Broad river in North Carolina. Most of the students were going on to study to be in the ministry. His first year, his first semester, a guy named Bill Loft sat in the back of the class and asked the professor, Professor Lambert a question. A profound question apparently, though he does not remember what it was. The professor paused and Fred thought, "Ha, ha, he doesn't even know the answer." And then the professors

eyes welled up with tears and he thought, "There is something else here." And then the professor said, "Mr. Loft, I think it would be better for all of us if I delayed my answer." Time passed and now it is their senior year and the students are all together with Professor Lambert studying advanced Greek. The Professor stopped and said, "Mr. Loft, about your question." Somethings just take time.²

If there is anything I have learned about my faith in my life it is that God comes to us in the events of our lives. Sometimes it is in the most painful and difficult of times. Other times it is in a moment of wonder and beauty and awe and we want to slow down and take it all in. But most of the time, God comes to us in the ordinary stuff of our daily lives. We only need to pay attention.

We sing a verse in the hymn, "Spirit of God, Descend Upon My Heart, a verse that goes,

"I ask no dream, no prophet ecstasies,
No sudden rending of the veil of clay,
No angel visitant, no opening skies.
But take the dimness of my soul away."

As Fred Craddock says, "I have learned to piece together a little bit of faith to live by; I just make it out of snippets of things, the question of a child, a burst of laughter, a walk to the mailbox, struggling with the text, a little prayer in the morning, conversation with a friend, an evening meal..."³ We each have our own list. God give us bread, daily bread to live by. "Give us this day our daily bread." Another translation of that verse says "Give us today the bread meant for tomorrow." In other word, let me have now a morsel of the heavenly banquet that God has prepared when the kingdom comes in it fullness. Give us now just a bit of that love and peace. We are not sure we can handle the full banquet. Just a small taste and it will be enough. Amen.

¹ Fred Craddock, The Collected Sermons of Fred B. Craddock, "Tell No One Before Easter," p. 124.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.