

Glory Babbalujah

Mark 9:2-9

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February 15, 2015

Who doesn't love a mountaintop experience? – those times in our lives when something fantastical happens, we see or understand God in a way we've never done before or a strong powerful sensation comes over us that feels like the Holy Spirit, or we have a period of time when we feel especially close to God or sure about our spiritual path. Or maybe just a really good week at camp. These are mountain top experiences.

Transfiguration Sunday is here to remind you, that at some point you have to come down from the mountain and back in the valley of hurt, doubt and worry... the place where you have to get back to work and live life without spiritual highs. Back to the place where heart break, struggle and disappointments reside. In other words, the every day. Fortunately the gospels do not leave out these great lows. Listen to what happens as soon as the disciples and Jesus descend from the mountaintop. They come across a crowd of people arguing with the rest of the disciples.

Jesus asked them, "What are you arguing about with them?" Someone from the crowd answered him, "Teacher, I brought you my son; he has a spirit that makes him unable to speak; and whenever it seizes him, it dashes him down; and he foams and grinds his teeth and becomes rigid; and I asked your disciples to cast it out, but they could not do so."

Spiritual highs are balanced with disappointments like this one. The point is that mountaintop experiences (great visions, great certainty, great power) are usually countered by great lows in the valley. Unfulfilled visions, failed attempts at doing good things, unresolved emotional moments. This is not karma or punishment. Wright says, "The more we are open to God, and to the different dimensions of God's glory, the more we seem to be open to the pain of the world."¹ So it makes sense to be guarded about such experiences (these miraculous moments of God's revelation) because they are never given as an end unto themselves but to equip us to serve the world, specifically the hurting and those who are not free.

Isolated, these experiences (these highs and lows) can be bewildering. So let's look beyond the transfiguration itself today because there are plenty of sermons out there about that. Instead I want to spend some time with Peter and his response to this glorious moment. His attempt to put words to his experience. His verbal response specifically. Mark says,

¹ Wright, Luke for Everyone

³³*Just as they were leaving him, Peter said to Jesus, "Master, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah" —not knowing what he said.*

I love that St Peter did not know what in the heck he was saying. Peter is usually the disciple we most relate to; he's known as the one who often says or does the things we think we would say or do. And so Peter's response to a powerful, complex and utterly unique moment is a gift to us because it reveals so much about who we are and who God is. Utterances like this, whether spontaneous or calculated, are a blessing. Because they level the playing field, they take the supernatural and make something natural out of it. Looking at someone who has gone before us in the paths of spiritual presence and communion with God and to see that sometimes their words just came about a babble is comforting. More comforting is that Christ does not reject Peter or us in our attempts to work through these glory filled highs and lows.

Gathering together for worship: the music, the preaching, the way we enact past events, all this is to put words to things, that on our own, we probably would not have words for.

The words of a doxology or faith statement themselves are not holy, the act of memorizing them doesn't make you holy, it is the meaning we give them, the awe we allow them to inspire in us that makes them meaningful.

Peter's words on that mountaintop are doing the same thing. He allows the awe to override his ability to be articulate. He suggests literally putting up a structure so that this moment, this glory, can be held and maintained and that they can memorialize what they are seeing. He expects it all to last. His words are also a very ordinary human response, **a logical statement to an illogical experience**. There are times when an illogical response is the best response.

The African Methodist Episcopal Church, or the AME church as it's commonly known as, was started because of a balcony. About the time this church was getting its footing in Charlotte St George's Methodist church in Philadelphia was headed for a split. It had been a rare mixed race church until there was some kind of tipping point and the blacks were segregated to a newly built balcony in the sanctuary. Congregants had freely sat wherever they wished regardless of color until the new sanctuary. In protest and exasperation Richard Allen and Absalom Jones led the African congregants out of the church in a famous and dramatic response to segregation. They had no plan, no church plant to start. They just walked out.

Jones went on to found the African Episcopal Church of St. Thomas, and Allen forged Mother Bethel Church and, eventually, the A.M.E. church - a wholly new denomination.

That is a holy statement, a doxology of sorts, to walk away from wrong, to create justice out of injustice, to be God's people in the face of impossibilities. To walk on without knowing where the path was leading.

At this point in the gospel story we are exactly half way. We have seen Jesus as a baby, a teacher, a prophet, dusty and tired and very human. Now we see him magically, robe and face shining, clearly divine. And now we are on the other side of the story, and we can begin to see where this is headed. We call this next path Lent.

When Jesus is finished with his 33 years of earthly ministry, he leaves us not with a sermon or a booklet of favorite sayings, the gospels do not end with the sermon on the mount but with Jesus on a cross. He does not leave us with words, he leaves us with Love enacted. It is the cross and then the empty tomb that are the greatest revelations of God. That act and that image is the climax of the Jesus story. And so we begin Lent with that image. Not with words, not even with understanding, and certainly with a sense that we cannot stay here but must go down before we can reach the end. Remembering that Jesus is blindingly present on the mountaintop and present and active in the valley (he immediately does a healing as soon as they reach the bottom) and God is very present on the cross and in the tomb.

I like seasons, I like the church ordering of time. The seasons are a bit like those booths Peter wanted to build, they are logical structures we put on illogical things like revelation, waiting, expectancy, life after death, holy beginnings, and such. And now we move from a calendar time of knowing to a time of doubt and discovery. No more booth making. Words will not suffice.

It is the opposite of Epiphany. We strip things down in order to metaphorically walk into that cloud and hopefully hear God's voice. The voice that has been speaking all along but was drowned out by the din of everyday living. We hit "re-set" button now and wait for God to fill us again... with what, we don't have to be sure. In the meantime we can be okay with silence and find comfort in words that do not have to be our own.

For in that cloud we might also hear God say "This is Jesus. Listen to Him."