

“A Clouded Vision”
Texts: Exodus 34:29-35 and Luke 9:28-36
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“While he was saying this, a cloud came and overshadowed them; and they were terrified as they entered the cloud.” Luke 9:34

The place to focus your attention this Transfiguration Sunday is on the eyes of the disciples. Heavy with fatigue, “weighed down by sleep”, Luke says. Those eyes had seen so much since the day they put down their nets for good. Peter, James, and John, they had seen miracles of multiplying bread and healed diseases and even restored life. They had watched with wonder as Jesus calmed a storm and their eyes had surveyed crowds that grew by the day as Jesus taught and told parables. With fear and apprehension they had watched the religious authorities and political establishment grow increasingly concerned about the impact of this Galilean rabbi. It had been a whirlwind journey thus far. They had come to the mountain to get away from it all for just a little while.

You can imagine the relief that flooded their eyes when Jesus suggested they climb the mountain for a time of prayer. These three disciples, Jesus closest friends, the same ones who will pray with him in the Garden of Gethsemane, jump at the opportunity to hike up the mountain and rest their weary eyes, to escape the crowds of needy people that followed them, to unwind on a kind of mountain retreat.

Maybe they were remembering the ominous words that Jesus had spoken just before they left town: “The Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elder, chief priests, and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised” (Luke 9:22). I imagine they were glad to have time to sort out these troubling forecasts. Mostly, though, they needed a nap!

But before they can even catch their breath, the disciples are bombarded, their senses overwhelmed by a fury of visions. Jesus is transformed before their eyes, his face shining like the sun, his clothes dazzling white. What happens next is even more surreal. Two of the heroes of Jewish faith, Elijah the great prophet and Moses the giver of the law, appear out of thin air, and begin to converse with Jesus.

It is at this point that I imagine the eyes of the disciples at their widest. And it is at this point that the gospel writer Luke calls our attention to the fishermen: “Since they had stayed awake, they saw his glory.” This momentary vision of God’s glory is a gift, but it is only given to those whose eyes are open.

Had the disciples consulted their Bibles before beginning the mountain journey, they may not have been so surprised by this sacred encounter, or by the guests who join Jesus.”

Maybe later the disciples remembered the role of the mountain in their faith stories. The shining face of Moses after his encounter with God on Sinai. Or Elijah on top of Mount Horeb as God passed by in the sound of sheer silence. The many mountaintop experiences of the people of God must have come to mind. This is the place where you meet God-the mountaintop.

I think this is where Peter, always the most resourceful of the disciples, gets his brilliant idea. Intent on remaining in this dreamlike world, where the glory of God is so palpable, Peter switches from fisherman to tent-maker. He plans to set up camp for a while.

Luke says that Peter didn't know what he was saying. I'm not so sure I agree with Luke. Have you ever wanted to put down roots in some sacred safe place and just stay a while? It is the feeling of the kindergartner hanging on to her mother's pant leg on the first day of school. It is the emotional outpouring of a group of young people on the last morning of a meaningful retreat. It is the long hug in the airport drop-off area after a short visit that may be the last visit. It is why people linger for so long at the receptions that follow funerals. Safe sacred space, surrounded by those who love and support you. Peter wanted to make it permanent. He wanted to *live* in this moment of glorious divine encounter. He had felt and seen what the poet John Donne begged for: “batter my heart, three-person'd God; for you as yet but knock, and breathe, and shine, and seek to mend” (<http://www.online-literature.com/donne/863/>). Batter my heart. Peter knew that feeling, and he wanted to stay right there. But Jesus is on the move.

In the summer of 2003, I made a pilgrimage to Managua, Nicaragua with a group of twelve college students. We were there to visit the Jubilee House Community, founded by five Presbyterians who moved to Managua in 1994 with a vision for partnering with community leaders to enable economic development in the poorest parts of the country. Long before economist Jeffrey Sachs and the book “Three Cups of Tea” made microfinance a household word, these American Christians were providing funds for small business start-ups in poverty-stricken communities in Central America. In the fall of 1998, the devastation caused by Hurricane Mitch destroyed tens of thousands of homes and displaced over 350,000 Nicaraguans.

We spent most of our time in Nueva Vida, a tent city outside of the capital where thousands of hurricane victims had been relocated by the government and Jubilee House Community partners had set up a medical clinic to serve the needs of these new residents. Throughout the ten-day journey, I was moved by the strength, firm resolve, and deep faith of the people we met. In a meeting with the leaders of the community, (all women) we asked what gave them this sense of hope amid such dire circumstances. One of the women responded for the group with one sentence “Our

community is called 'Nueva Vida.'" New life. **New** life. In the context of that community, I too felt a sense of newness and vitality wash over me. And then, after only ten days, it was time to go home. I was a wreck. On the ride to the airport, I was inconsolable. At the terminal, I dissolved into a twenty-one year old pool of tears. I was so sure that the depth of sacred power, and the sense of call that I had felt in Nueva Vida would be lost forever when I landed in the Raleigh-Durham international airport and returned to my "old life", my senior year of college.

No matter how long I live, or how many words crowd my memory, I will never forget those of one member of the Jubilee House Community as I boarded the plane to return to the United States, awash in tears. Grabbing my hand, she said: "now your work begins"

Despite Peter's understandable request, the disciples, like most of us, do not have permanent residence on the mountaintop. We live in a world of carpools and doctor's appointments and flooding basements. We live in a world where hardworking people lose jobs and healthcare and homes. A world where even the poorest nations can be further devastated by natural disaster and even those who are far too young can be taken by cruel and inexplicable disease. We can be forgiven for wanting to set up camp when a sacred moment comes our way. Most of the time, our individual and communal lives are not lived in the thin air of high altitude spirituality. We

So the disciples dust themselves off and, still bleary-eyed, return home; where there are sick people to be healed and there are mourners to be comforted and there are people who have great need, and there is work to be done. The very next verse in Luke's gospel reads: "On the next day, when they had come down from the mountain, a great crowd met him." There is no lingering on the mountain with Jesus.

These few moments must provide sustenance for the disciples in the difficult weeks ahead, when the Mountain of Transfiguration will become a hill called Calvary and the booming voice from heaven will be replaced by the jeers and taunts of Roman soldiers. The mountaintop experience will be crucial to their lives as disciples, but only if they return to the harshness of the real world and only if they stay awake to holiness in their midst.

Moments of doubt and fear will assault them from every side. But if they stay awake, if they remember the words and images of this mountain, the memory will be enough. Enough to carry them to the next divine encounter, early in the morning on the first day of the week as the light is just dawning.

Transfiguration Sunday stands as a reminder that the glimpses of holiness we encounter, cloudy and rare as they may be, are gifts from God, meant to be remembered and shared and filed away for the uncertain future.

Thanks to a Netflix subscription, Sara and I have in recent months devoted nearly ten hours to watching the Lord of the Rings Trilogy. I may have been the only person left in America who had not seen **any** of the movies, and I'm glad I saw them. Of all the interesting and theologically informed storylines that makeup Tolkien's plot, the most moving for me was the pilgrimage of the hobbits. Leaving behind the safety and comfort of their homes in the shire, for a journey fraught with danger and risk, a mission on which so much depends. I love that each time these hobbits are tempted to give up and give in; it is the vision of home that drives them on. Remember the shire, they say to each other, and this glimpse of a safe and sacred place provides enough hope for another day.

As we enter the Lenten Season this week, we too should hold fast to the vision that we have been given. With the disciples, we need to hold firmly on to memories of holy encounter in difficult days when we doubt the very presence of God in our lives.

The road ahead leads to Jerusalem, where there will be denial, betrayal, and death. There will be the kind of anxious fear that always seems to follow our descent from the mountaintop. All this awaits Jesus and his disciples, and us.

But something important has changed on that mountain. Now there is that voice from heaven ringing in our ears. There is the confirmation of the law and prophets in the persons of Moses and Elijah. And there is that vision of Jesus in dazzling clothes, shining like the sun, a vision we will want to remember on Easter morning, when the women are greeted at an empty tomb by two men. Luke says they were dressed in dazzling white.

In those moments when our perspective is clouded and our hope has run out, when we are immobilized by the pain of the world and our inability to stop it, we can tell one another these stories of vision and holy encounter when the presence of God was unmistakable. In times heavy with anxiety and distress, the hope they offer may not be much. But it is a glimpse of what is at the heart of it all. It is a promise that all shall be well. And, by the grace of God, it is enough to journey on. Amen.