

WITH BRIGHT SHINY FACES

Matthew 17.1-9

Transfiguration, February 26, 2017

Dedication of John Mason Beasley

Tim Phillips, Seattle First Baptist Church

The church with psalms must shout, no door can keep them out, that's from the choir's anthem this morning.

It's amazing to me how lyrics can seep through the doors – even the locked doors - of our consciousness.

Have you ever been haunted by lyrics you never meant to remember?

For me, it's an old Four Seasons/Frankie Valli song: *O what a night; late December back in 63; what a very special time for me ...*

There is nothing about those lyrics that makes any kind of sense for me to remember. But there they are.

So, when the choir sings: “The church with psalms must shout, no door can keep them out,” we need to recognize that what we are dealing with, when it comes to the songs we sing and the stories we tell, is a power that is greater than we know.

So we should be careful.

On this morning when we are dedicating John Mason, I'm reminded of some other lyrics by Stephen Sondheim:

Careful the things you say

Children will listen

Careful the things you do

Children will see ... and learn

Children may not obey, but children will listen.

Children are listening today – our children and other people’s children.

And that’s why the ancient Hebrew writers are careful to say: “Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart; recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise.”

Children may not obey. But children will listen. Things seep into their consciousness even if they didn’t intend to remember them.

There is another set of lyrics that have been following me around this week. Again, I don’t remember learning them. But sometimes, when I walk into the office and see the staff busy at their desks, without really thinking about it, I find myself saying: Well, it looks like “we’re all in our places with bright shiny faces.”

I got curious about where these lyrics came from and, according to Lindsey Williams, they are part of a song composed by two sisters in 1893. Dr. Patty Hill was the principal of the Louisville, Kentucky, Experimental Kindergarten where her sister, Mildred, was a teacher.

The fact that there was an “experimental kindergarten” in Kentucky in 1893 gives me hope.

The Hill sisters were part of a movement that believed children “were creative and responsive to learning at a much earlier age than 6” when they traditionally started first grade. They wanted to wake up children’s minds with games, rhymes, coloring, music, dancing and singing.

Williams says:

Patty devised the curricula. Mildred drew on her musical talent as an organist for her Old Kentucky Church to provide music for singing and dancing.

And together they wrote:

Good morning to you.

*Good morning to you.
We're all in our places,
With bright shining faces.
Oh what a way
To start a new day.*

It had a modest beginning but eventually this song about waking up to a new day with openness to learn and faces glowing with possibility became a standard for generations of children across the country – even if they couldn't remember where they learned it or why.

Mildred died in 1916 and Patty, who went on to become a professor of early childhood education at Columbia University, died in 1946.

I'd like to think that Patty and Mildred are not forgotten today because ... “we are all in our places with bright shiny faces.”

Now, if you are wondering what all this has to do with the texts for today, I will tell you that I almost gave up on the Transfiguration story in Matthew 17. Except that I noticed something.

That ancient Hebrew blessing we use most Sundays from the book of Numbers says: “May God bless you and keep you; may God's *face shine* on you and be gracious to you.”

And many generations later, Matthew tells the story in Matthew 17: *Jesus took with him Peter and James and his brother John and led them up a high mountain, by themselves. And he was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became dazzling white.*

What is it about bright shiny faces?

For Mildred and Patty, it was believing something about children other people didn't see.

In that ancient blessing, it is that we are held by a presence that is greater and more gracious than we can sometimes see.

For the disciples, it is seeing Jesus in a light they haven't seen before.

“Bright shiny faces” seems to have something to do with seeing something that might otherwise be missed.

And the story in Matthew goes on:

Suddenly there appeared to them Moses and Elijah, talking with him. Then Peter said to Jesus, “Lord, it is good for us to be here; if you wish, I will make three dwellings here, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.” While he was still speaking, suddenly a bright cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud a voice said, “This is my Son, my Beloved; with whom I am well pleased; listen to him!”

When the disciples heard this, they fell to the ground and were overcome by fear. But Jesus came and touched them, saying, “Get up and do not be afraid.” And when they looked up, they saw no one except Jesus himself alone.

Peter almost missed it. What he sees in this powerful intimate mystical experience is a building project. And he has a plan.

What the experience is offering is something else – it's an opportunity to just be, to listen, to see. It's an opportunity to be present and to see himself in the company of those bright shiny faces.

But what Peter has is a plan.

When we started talking about the dedication of John Mason, Erin and Ben sent me a short story from *Resistance* by Barry Lopez. It's a story that is important to them about an author who has been living with the indigenous people of the Amazon rainforest and their teaching him how to see. As the author prepares to leave, he writes:

I will not go until I have made a form of protection that fits into their world, something that says, as eloquently as their stories, it is good to be fully alive and may this protect you against whatever it is in the world that cannot or will not see us, but that nevertheless has plans for us.

I have been struck by this: “protection against whatever it is in the world that cannot or will not see us, but nevertheless has plans for us.”

That sounds like Peter’s problem. That sounds like my problem sometimes. I am better at plans than simply being present.

I have not often thought about our time together as a kind of protection but I am beginning to see it now. There are forces that have plans for us whether they can or will see us. I’m feeling more and more vulnerable in the world and, like those disciples, I can be overwhelmed by fear. When I don’t have it in me to drag myself out of bed in the morning, I need to hear some voice that says, “Get up and don’t be afraid.”

When Ben wrote about the meaning of this day, he said:

When he’s able to understand, I want John Mason to leave church with that protection, an understanding that fits into his world, whatever his world may look like. I want him to leave church knowing that “it is good to be fully alive,” and I want the lessons imparted there to protect him from those things he will inevitably encounter in the world that will have no regard for him, but will nevertheless affect him.

That’s what I want. I want to leave church knowing that it is good to be fully alive. I want the lessons we share here to be like those lyrics that we can’t get out of our heads – that seep through the doors, even the locked doors, of our consciousness. I want to go out into the world in the company of those bright shiny faces that help us see the things we might have otherwise missed.

I want to hear a voice today that says, “Get up and don’t be afraid” because you are always in the presence of One who will bless you and keep you and whose face shines on you.

And today if you hear that voice, do not harden your hearts.

NOTES

“The church with psalms must shout, no door can keep them out,” is from the anthem for the day, “Let All the World in Every Corner Sing,” R.V. Williams. The history of the “Good Morning” song is by Lindsey Williams at www.lindseywilliams.org. The short story, “Flight from Berlin,” is one of nine stories by Barry Lopez in *Resistance* (2005), representing “nine people marginalized by a dystopian, not too distant future, version of the U.S.” (Ben Beasley).