

Waking Up to a Strange Glory
Transfiguration Sunday, February 7, 2016
Luke 9.28-36
Tim Phillips, Seattle First Baptist Church

Thank you, Pastor Ned, for leading us in prayer this morning. It sets up for us the context of this story in Luke 9.

Actually, I have never thought of this Transfiguration text as a commentary on prayer but it strikes me as a lesson in what Pastor Craig Darling used to say about prayer as “imagining.” He would invite us in this time of prayer together to see our loved ones and the world and ourselves in a different light. Because prayer isn’t about magically making something happen. It’s about holding our joy and our concerns in this light that opens us to see the mystery – this strange glory – that is the world and our human existence in God.

So, as I read this text this morning, I invite you to think about what this story might say to you about prayer.

The text is printed in your bulletin and I’ll ask you to follow along. And, when we get to the part about the cloud, I’m going to ask all of you to be that voice ... Together you will be that voice that says, “This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!” And then I’ll continue the reading through the end.

Luke 9.28.36: The Transfiguration

Now about eight days after these sayings Jesus took with him Peter and John and James, and went up on the mountain to pray. And while he was praying, the appearance of his face changed, and his clothes became dazzling white. Suddenly they saw two men, Moses and Elijah, talking to him.

I’ve always wondered how the disciples were supposed to recognize Moses and Elijah. There weren’t photographs. How would they know that the two men talking to Jesus were Moses and Elijah? They must have imagined it to be them.

They appeared in glory and were speaking of his departure, which he was about to accomplish at Jerusalem.

“Departure” is a euphemism. It’s like when we talk about the “departed.” What we mean is that they are dead. So the conversation between Jesus and Moses and Elijah is about the impending death of Jesus.

And sometimes we see people's lives in a different light when they are about to die or have died.

Now Peter and his companions were weighed down with sleep; but since they had stayed awake, they saw his glory and the two men who stood with him. 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. While he was saying this, a cloud came and overshadowed them; and they were terrified as they entered the cloud. Then from the cloud came a voice that said,

[All] *'This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!'*

When the voice had spoken, Jesus was found alone. And they kept silent and in those days told no one any of the things they had seen.

I look forward to hearing what this story might tell you about prayer.

For now, let me make a couple observations.

When the disciples are overshadowed by that cloud and they “enter into” it, they hear a voice that tells them to listen; that this is my Beloved One.

Sometimes when I make a hospital visit it's like walking into a cloud. I don't know what to say. And when I am asked to pray, my mind gets all cloudy and jumbled up and all I can do for a few seconds, at least, is to listen – to listen for that voice that comes out of the cloud to say, no matter what you see or don't see, “this is my beloved one.” Sometimes, especially when I am in a cloud, prayer can just be listening for that voice.

As the disciples are having this great moment, as they get a glimpse of glory, they want to make it permanent. Peter wants to build “three dwellings” so they can hold on somehow to that experience.

Sometimes prayer for me is letting go. It's about acknowledging with gratitude those spiritual “highs” that have shaped my life and then letting them go so that I don't get stuck in the past – I don't dwell on those ‘glory days’ -- so I can be free to pay attention to the glory that is present with me right now.

Sometimes prayer is listening. Sometimes it's letting go.

And sometimes, it's seeing my life in the greater flow of history. In prayer, the disciples get to see the glory of Jesus in communion with Moses and Elijah.

Sometimes when we pray together in this place, I am surprised to see the faces of those who have gone before. I may not even be intentionally thinking about someone, but there he or she is. A face pops up in my consciousness and, for a moment, I see my life in the light of that connection – what the book of Hebrews calls that “great cloud of witnesses.”

Sometimes prayer for me is listening.

Sometimes it's letting go.

Sometimes it's seeing my life in the light of memory.

And sometimes it's just being awake. When I am tired and overwhelmed, it's so easy to fall asleep. And there are so many things that would lull us to sleep. So, for me, prayer, like those exhausted disciples, is resisting the pressure to fall asleep and to be awake to that strange glory that is all around us.

I can't imagine a better commentary on this story than those lines by the Buddhist monk, Thich Nhat Hanh:

Sometimes you encounter people who are so pure, beautiful, and content ... What you perceive in them is their awakened self ... and what they reflect back to you is your own capacity for being awake.

I was at an American Baptist gathering the early part of this week and one of the pastors and his wife were sharing with us the experience they are having as the pastor lives with cancer. He was diagnosed with multiple myeloma two years ago. That's the same cancer that took my dad 7 years ago so I couldn't help but see something of my own life reflected in his.

There were five experiences that shaped this journey, they said.

First there was shock – the shock of the diagnosis but also the shock of the cost of treatment, running about \$1.4 million at this point.

Shock, they said, runs into confusion. There is the cloud of confusion about treatment plans and navigating the system and the well-meaning but sometimes clueless advice of people who are convinced that they know just the right thing to make you better.

With shock and confusion there is pain – not only the physical pain but the pain of loss; losing the ability to do things they love; losing friends who cannot deal with all this; anticipating the loss of time with children and grandchildren.

There is shock and confusion and pain and also discovering, they said, that life is an adventure of new friends and new opportunities and deep connection.

Finally, they said – and I didn't see this coming – there is beauty. There is this heightened sensitivity to beauty. One morning, the pastor says: "I woke up to a beautiful sunrise and I said, 'I'm good; that's enough for today.'"

As I listened to this pastor and his wife, I was aware that they began to look different to me. They were transfigured. They woke us up to see our lives in the light of this powerful, mystifying combination of sorrow and the celebration of beauty.

When I was on vacation, I read the biography of the great German pastor, teacher, and martyr who died resisting the Nazis, Dietrich Bonhoeffer. The title of the book by Charles Marsh is *Strange Glory* and I wanted to be inspired to see my own life in the light of his.

Which is fitting for today because he was born on February 4, 1906 – Thursday was the 110th anniversary of his birth.

As I started reading the book, it didn't take me too long to discover that I didn't like Bonhoeffer very much.

He was precocious.

He was privileged and never seemed to miss an opportunity to use that privilege to enhance his life – perhaps even, in the end, to try to save it. Although, to be fair, he also tried to use that privilege to save the lives of several Jewish friends.

He was intellectually arrogant, and when he visited New York, he had nothing good to say about my hero, Harry Emerson Fosdick. [111]

He was obsessed with his wardrobe.

He was notorious for sleeping late, taking afternoon naps, and expecting his family's household servants to go out of the way to get things he wanted.

And, this author of one of the finest books on life together, impressed his classmates "by his remarkable skill at avoiding menial labor." [95]

I realized that I did not like this guy.

And then I realized it didn't matter. That's the point.

Bonhoeffer's life, like my own, isn't just about liking or being liked. It's about this strange glory which is our human existence; a history of brokenness and beauty, the mystery of destructive capacity and creative possibility.

You can't read the life of Dietrich Bonhoeffer without recognizing that the light it represents is set against the horrible darkness of Nazi Germany. If there is any glory in Bonhoeffer's human existence, it has to be a strange kind of glory – a light that is refracted through the dark waters of human evil.

So, as I read, I tried to be awake to that beauty in his life that might reflect back into mine.

For instance, while it is true that he was unimpressed and downright dismissive of white liberals during his visit to the U.S., he was completely taken with the Black church.

It shouldn't be lost on us at the beginning of this Black History Month, that what carried Bonhoeffer through his courageous resistance to the Nazis and empowered his dream of a new world was his experience of the African-American church. I try to imagine this blond, tailored, German-educated young man teaching a Sunday School class for boys at the Abyssinian Baptist Church in Harlem, then one of the largest Black churches in America. It was the only time, he writes, "he had experienced true religion in the United States." He had never experienced such joy in worship. And it got down "in his bones." Singing those spirituals with that "strange mixture of reserved melancholy" and ecstatic joy was a glory for him. [117-118, 133]

Bonhoeffer's devotional practice included his daily reading in the Moravian prayer book and listening to the great classical music of his homeland and those mighty Lutheran hymns. But his practice began to include listening to his collection of African-American spirituals and gospel music "born," he writes, "of a mysterious combination of suffering and humour." [147 & 245] A strange glory.

His story made me want to wake up to the things, as unlikely as they may seem, that really feed my soul. I want to be awake to those things – anything – that may or may not fit the traditional devotional categories that nonetheless make me want to be courageous and inspire an indomitable hope.

Among those things for Bonhoeffer was “recognizing dissent as a spiritual discipline.” [171]

I was reading all this with the political campaign playing in the background. I came across this shocking line about pre-Nazi Germany: “Since the end of World War I, the Conservative Party in Germany had become less a political entity than a club of angry malcontents.” [91] Reading that sent chills down my spine.

And Bonhoeffer’s particular dissent was, as a Christian, to be in solidarity with Jews. This is how Marsh describes it: “Formed as a Christian in discipleship to Jesus, Bonhoeffer realized finally that genuine *humanness* would forever wander into abstraction if it were not anchored in the history, suffering and religion of the Jews.” [369]

Bonhoeffer’s story wakes up in me this strange glory that comes with the spiritual practice of dissent – especially the kind that resists the systems that de-humanize people.

When my colleagues ask me what’s going on at Seattle First Baptist I want to say that we are cultivating the spiritual practice of dissent along with all those who being treated as less than human.

When Bonhoeffer was finally hauled off to a concentration camp, he got a letter from his beloved friend Bethge that inspired him again to read the Song of Solomon, that erotic love poem in the Hebrew Bible. It includes this line: “Love is as strong as death.” [371]

Bonhoeffer was hanged just days before the Allies arrived to liberate the camp. In those last days of his life, Bonhoeffer turned to the strangest of all human and divine glories: Love. And not some heavenly version. The kind that reaches through the clouds and touches our bodies and wants to fix its humble dwelling in us. It’s that voice that wants to wake us up with “I love you.”

Sometimes prayer for me is listening.
Sometimes it's letting go of those old glory days.
Sometimes it's seeing my life in the light of history.
And sometimes it's just waking up to that strange glory of a love that is stronger
than death.

“Listen; this is my Beloved One.” And, today, if you hear that voice, do not
harden your hearts.

NOTES

Strange Glory by Charles Marsh (Vintage Books, 2014).