

Rev. Shannon Johnson Kershner
February 3, 2008
Transfiguration of the Lord Sunday
Matthew 17:1-9

Focused Imagination

The yelling caught her attention. She had just sat down after a long day of mothering. The kids were finally in bed. Her husband was in the other room working on the computer. She was alone at last. But then she heard yelling and crying. “Great,” she said as she pulled herself off of the couch. She was so tired and she just wanted her children to be asleep. She walked into the hallway and realized it was quiet. The sound was not coming from her children’s rooms.

She went back out into the front room of her home. The noise was coming from somewhere outside. She walked over to the window and heard angry adult voices, mixed in with the crying of children. She stood frozen. She listened for signs of physical violence, but did not hear any. She told me that she just stood there, trying to figure out what, if anything, she could do. And just as she was getting the courage to open the front door, a car door slammed, tires screeched and the furor was gone. She sank to the ground—sad for the adults enslaved in their anger and hatred, but heartbroken for the children being hit by the emotional shrapnel. She told me that she did not sleep that night. All she could do was pray for those children—“O Lord, dry their tears. O Lord, keep them safe. O Lord, help them survive the chaos. O Lord, why.”

It was Thursday and the shelf in my office was empty. Moments earlier, I had passed out my last copy of the book that I give to women experiencing domestic violence. I gave it to a grandmother who was trying to talk with me while corralling her two young grandsons. The book is called “A Christian Woman’s Response to Violence” and it is published by the FaithTrust Institute—an institute whose mission is to provide religious leaders and community advocates with the tools and knowledge we need to address the religious and cultural issues related to abuse.

Since coming to Woodhaven six years ago, I have given out twelve of those little books—all given to women who have come in after driving by and seeing the name of a female clergyperson on the marquis, or to women who have come to worship a couple of times and determined we are a safe place. As glad as I am to have that book to hand out, I am always devastated when the shelf is empty and I have to order more. “O Lord, dry their tears. O Lord, keep them safe. O Lord, help them survive the chaos. O Lord, why.”

Then I sat down with this text—this strange, otherworldly, apocalyptic-like text that describes what we call “The Transfiguration of the Lord.” The moment when, just for a brief glimpse, a few disciples saw Jesus transformed in a visible way, shining with glory, gleaming with God’s favor. I read and re-read it, trying to find my way into the text. But I just couldn’t do it. I just could not enter the story.

Instead, I found myself resonating with the words of Episcopal priest Fleming Rutledge in her reflection on faith. “Frankly,” she wrote, “the scorn of intellectuals doesn’t bother me half as much as the apparent inaction of God in so much of daily life. The doubts and difficulties that I have are concerned with the discrepancy between the Biblical promise and the actual events that go on around us. It seems that God is inside a cloud most of the time.”¹

And with her words sitting next to this story, intermixed with the words of my friend and the pain I had just witnessed, I realized why I was having such a hard time. I was down in a valley, while Jesus was up on the mountaintop. I was down in the valley with the disciples left behind, trying like crazy to muster up enough faith and courage to be God’s instruments of healing, while Jesus was up on the mountaintop, shining with glory, gleaming with God’s favor.

And I was mad, mad, mad about it. “C’mon Jesus,” I felt like saying. “Get down off that mountain and get back to work. People are hurting down here, children are crying, and I cannot do one thing about it. The disciples and I keep trying and we are not getting anywhere. Stop gallivanting around with Moses, Elijah, Peter and the others. Come back down.”

Do you ever feel that way? Do you ever feel like you are down in a valley, one of the walking wounded or one of the frustrated disciples? Have you ever felt like telling Jesus to hurry it on up and get down here, to finish the job he started, to get back to work? If you have, you are in good Scriptural company. “The agonizing problem of the absence of God is explicitly and repeatedly acknowledged in the Bible, especially in the Psalms: ‘How long will you hide yourself, O Lord? Will you hide yourself forever?’ⁱⁱⁱ” “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from helping me, from the words of my groaning?”

These confrontational prayers are found throughout Scripture, even on Jesus’ own lips at Gethsemane and the cross. Personally, I am deeply grateful for them. So much of popular Christianity preaches that if you have doubt, if you get angry, if you rail out at God, then that means you don’t have enough faith, you don’t have enough trust, you really are not Christian-enough.

Wrong, these Scriptures assert. While these kinds of cries might be judged by the world to be acts of unfaith and failure, for the trusting community, their use is an act of bold faithⁱⁱⁱ. For as Walter Bruggemann claims, “There is nothing out of bounds, nothing precluded or inappropriate [when it comes to conversation with God.] To withhold parts of life from that conversation is in fact to withhold parts of life from the sovereignty of God. Everything must be brought to speech^{iv}.”

It is faithful to hold God accountable. But, when we do, we might want to be prepared to hear what Job heard. Do you remember? Job let God have it after all the suffering and loss he endured. And then, after 33 chapters of that, Scripture tells us God came in a whirlwind to respond to Job’s laments.

“Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge?...Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth? Tell me, if you have understanding. Have you commanded the morning since your days began? Have you comprehended the expanse of the earth? Declare, if you know all this.”

In other words, hold God accountable, but also remember we don’t, we can’t, see the whole picture of things. So much of God’s activity in our world is incognito, hidden from normal human sight, disguised in the ordinariness of life^v that it becomes easier to see what we think God **isn’t** doing rather than what God **is** doing.

And I think that acknowledgment of our creaturely limitation is where we can enter into this story of glory on the mountain. For while we dare not try to explain how, while we dare not try to nail down Mystery with a capital M, we can grapple with why. Why was this event between Jesus and Peter, James and John so important that all three Synoptic Gospels record it? Why is this event centered in Matthew between his baptism and his resurrection? Why even make the effort to enter into this story in the first place?

I think we are given a clue about “why” when we look at what Jesus said as they started to head back down into the valley. “Tell no one about the vision until after the Son of Man has been raised from the dead.” Now—we could dwell on the whole secrecy motif in Matthew, but I want us to look at how Jesus described what had happened up there on that mountain. He called it a vision.

This is the only time in the Gospels where Jesus uses that word “vision.” It is used in the books of Isaiah, Daniel, and Acts—and in each instance it refers to a time when, just for a moment, it is as if the heavenly shroud is pulled back to reveal the full picture of God’s work in the world.

Let me put it another way. When Julie teaches confirmation class and they get to questions of God’s providence, she will often use the imagery of a tapestry. If you look at the back of a tapestry, all you see are bits of thread and knots, chaotic pieces of a picture you really cannot make sense of. But, when you turn it over, it all finally comes together and you get the wholeness of what truly is. In the Bible, vision is that picture of the wholeness of what truly is. It is not what one sees with the eyes. It is what one sees with the imagination of faith.

Mark Twain once quipped “You cannot depend on your eyes when your imagination is out of focus.” Exactly. I am convinced that one of the reasons we are given the gift of this story, this strange, other-worldly, apocalyptic-like text called “The Transfiguration of the Lord,” is to help keep our imaginations focused. So that we might remember that the valley is not all there is. That the suffering and the pain is not all there is. That the yelling and the crying is not all there is.

We are given the gift of the story so that when we are in the valley, we might remember the glory on the mountaintop. So we might remember that our God is a God who loves us so much God became one of us, one with us. That our God is a God who makes a way out of no way. That our God is a God who became weak in power in order to be strong in love. We are given the gift of the story to sharpen the focus of our imagination so we might receive the courage to keep on. To keep on walking. To keep on following. To keep on loving. To keep on praying.

And, sisters and brothers, I am here to tell you this gift comes just in time. For we stand on the edge of the season of valleys, the season of Lent. Starting this Wednesday, we move into the holy time when our heads are marked with ashes and the candles are slowly extinguished. We deliberately move into the valley together, following the One we call Savior and Lord.

And though Jesus’ clothes shined brightly on the mountain, they will soon be wadded on by soldiers. And though Jesus’ two companions on the mountain were Elijah and Moses, they will soon be two criminals hanging on either side. And though he is declared God’s Son by the mysterious voice on the mountain, that declaration will soon be a taunt of mockery at trial. And though Jesus was shown in glory on the mountain, he will soon be shown in humiliation on the cross. Yes—the gift of this story comes just in time. So that as we begin the walk through Lent, our imaginations might be focused not just on what can be seen, but on what is unseen.

For when we step back on this Transfiguration Sunday, our focused imaginations show us that all of it—both the glory on the mountain and the shadow of the valley—are needed to paint the full picture of the One we call our Messiah, our Brother, our Savior. For both the glory and the shadows form our creaturely lives, don’t they. We don’t just have one without the other.

So thanks be to God that we have a God who doesn’t, either. And as we begin our walk through this holy season of Lent, may our imaginations be focused so that our eyes might see. And maybe, just maybe, we might be transformed on the journey into more of the fullness of who God has created us to be, too.

ⁱ Rutledge, Fleming. Help My Unbelief. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing, 2000, page 192.

ⁱⁱ Ibid, page 192.

ⁱⁱⁱ Brueggemann, Walter. The Message of the Psalms. Minneapolis: Augsburg Press, 1984, page 52

^{iv} Ibid, page 52.

^v Long, Tom. Matthew. Page 193.