



C. Kutz-Marks

## Still Transfiguring

Transfiguration Sunday, a, February 3, 2008  
Matt. 17:1-8

This morning's lesson in Matthew is paired in our lectionary with the Exodus 24:12ff reading:

12 The LORD said to Moses, "Come up to me on the mountain, and wait there; and I will give you the tablets of stone, with the law and the commandment, which I have written for their instruction."

13 So Moses set out with his assistant Joshua, and Moses went up into the mountain of God.

14 To the elders he had said, "Wait here for us, until we come to you again; for Aaron and Hur are with you; whoever has a dispute may go to them."

15 Then Moses went up on the mountain, and the cloud covered the mountain.

16 The glory of the LORD settled on Mount Sinai, and the cloud covered it for six days; on the seventh day he called to Moses out of the cloud.

17 Now the appearance of the glory of the LORD was like a devouring fire on the top of the mountain in the sight of the people of Israel.

18 Moses entered the cloud, and went up on the mountain. Moses was on the mountain for forty days and forty nights.

It reminds us that one of the names that ancient Hebrews used for God was "El Shaddai" which means, "God, the one of the mountains". El Shaddai was the name of an earth shaking God, who action transformed lives and molded the history of the earth. El Shaddai lived in the mountains and spoke from the mountaintop. It is little wonder to the Hebrew people who received their covenant from the hand of Moses, that it would be on a mountain that God would choose to deliver the Law, the basis for their covenantal life together.

El Shaddai is still the name of God we, too, might use as we seek in our day and time, when we leave the easy familiar pathways down in the work-a-day valleys of life, and ascend the mountain to be with God. El Shaddai waits for us.

Let me share with you a story:

It had been no ordinary day, but I was still seeing with ordinary eyes. The group of college students that I had spent most of the summer of 1973 with had been touring around Israel. After spending the better part of the summer working and studying on a kibbutz, a collective farm, in the fertile Galilee, southwest of the Sea Jesus sailed, after a rich summer of hard physical work, hard psychological work, our small group was finishing up nearly two weeks of touring throughout Palestine. We were going to be flying out of Tel Aviv for the U.S. the following afternoon. This was our last full day in Israel. This chapter of our lives that was just overwhelmingly powerful, this chapter was coming to a close.

That afternoon we had checked into our hotel on the Western shore of the Sea of Galilee. So the city of Tiberius was to be the place of our last night's sleep. I was well into what I call "the last time syndrome." Grieving the end of some life chapter.

"This is the last bus ride to Haifa on our day off."

"This is the last bucket of pears I'll ever pick on the kibbutz."

"This is the last time I'll drive the old tractor pulling a food wagon to the kibbutz's children's quarters."

"This is the last meal I'll eat in Israel."

Do you know what I mean?

My ordinary vision was being tunneled into the negative, self-pitying way. So I was ready.

It was almost dinner time, time to eat our last supper there at the hotel. I had about 20 minutes until we were to gather in the restaurant, so I had decided to take a last walk back up the hill.

What can I say. It was the scenery of paintings. The gentle bowl of mountains ringed the great lake. The insistent wind of the day was suddenly calm. The setting sun glinting off the waters of the Sea of Galilee... the waters I had swum, that Jesus had sailed. Sitting down now on the hillside, pensive, calm, a chirp of birds overhead was drowned out by the drone of the bumblebee nearby – and the buzzing sound that began to fill my consciousness – in her lazy rounds of the wildflower field we were sharing.

And then, in the midst of this peaceful scene.... in the middle of what might have been just nice.... I was overcome.

It wasn't an emotional, tearyness, but quite suddenly and quite powerfully, my ordinary vision was replaced by a keen awareness that I was not just in beautiful spot. I was in perfection. Perfection! Do you know what I mean? The time, the place, the sun, the water, the completion of the summer, the vision of Jesus on the sea, the bond of friendship with the group down the hill, the love of family to whom I would return, the hum of the bee.... it was altogether so much better than good. It was perfect.

Time stopped.

Desire stopped. Struggle stopped. Concern for everything dropped.

It all stopped in that moment, that wonderful blessed moment.

And when eventually, there came a need to somehow respond to the miracle, my reaction was a spoken prayer, "O God, what more could I want? If I die in the next moment, my life is now complete. I need nothing more."

It was only a few moments, you see, but in them, normal vision, ordinary vision had been replaced by a recognition of fulfillment and peace

that I pray will never leave me completely. That was nearly 35 years ago, now, but just the memory it still fills me with awe and thankfulness.

If you head due north of where I had my epiphany that afternoon, only a few miles north to the area of Caesarea Philippi, you'd arrive at where James, John and Peter had theirs. About six days earlier, tired from miles of tagging behind Jesus, inspired by his teachings, amazed by his healings, challenged by the call to changed their lives.... they were drifting farther from ordinary vision.... Trying once more to open them to marvel that they were witnessing, Jesus pointedly asked his disciples...

"Who do people say that the Son of Man is?"

14 And they said, "Some say John the Baptist, but others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets."

And imagine they began to sense in that pregnant pause, that more was coming. The challenge:

15 He said to them, "But who do you say that I am?"

What do you see beneath the surface of everyday vision,  
What is the deep truth before your very eyes....

16 Simon Peter answered, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God."

You are the one, Peter said, who is destined by God to  
lead out of our darkness into the light of the new day.....

17 And Jesus answered him, "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven.

18 And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it.

Flesh and blood can carry us only so far on the ascent up the mountain. Flesh and blood do not reveal, but only provide the underpinning, the foundation from which the spiritual can proceed. It is God, who reveals.

And to those like Peter able perceive the activity of God – having no more evidence than others, but having the hunger to find and to experience the presence of God...on these Jesus Christ builds his church. And the gates of hell will not prevail against us. You and me, the church.

Six days later. Peter, James and John have followed Jesus up a mountain. We hear nothing more about their special preparation for the miracle. We can only imagine – as we well should- their confusion within:

- Why, when we are so exhausted is Jesus up another hill to pray?
- Why does this Messiah that kept talking like a martyr,
- His promise for a brighter future on the far side of pain and suffering;
- His confusing understanding of what a Messiah does!

But evidently- whatever groundwork was necessary had been laid. They were ready. Because then and there they experienced the peeling away of ordinary vision and the unveiling of the deeper truth:

>Jesus dazzling white... glowing from a holy source that they'd have known as Shekinah... the glory of the Lord God;

And in the presence of Moses and Elijah: great figures of their past who had already attained their immortal status, there was Jesus was entering in their eyes that very same pantheon.

Oh, how I wish the scriptures here could help us capture the inner experience of James, John and Peter! Would that our Bible shared with us how they felt; what it did for their understanding; what it did to their later life! For right here they are pioneers for each of us, charting a course that

we each must follow if our relationship with God will ever be more than second-hand.

They are engulfed by this new world. Their old understandings of what was stable: people don't glow; dead people stay dead... were not just being challenged. They evaporated. This was Holy Ground. Bow down in worship.

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Epiphany comes to a close now, the season of our recognition... In the coming of the Christ-child we have in retrospect come to see the paradoxical way that God chose to enter the world. And now, today, we receive the witness of Peter, James, & John to their witness...of the transfiguration of Jesus.

But it doesn't matter much does it? How many lives do know have been turned right-side up simply because people know that Jesus Christ was born;

- because they know the right words of the right catechism in the right church.

How many lives do know that have been changed, because people understand rightly?

My friends, in the final analysis this journey of faith is not about understanding. It is not about correct theology. It is not about being "right" in what we believe compared to the Methodists or the Baptists, or the Hindu or the Bahai. What this journey is about is coming TO PERSONALLY, DIRECTLY KNOW what Peter and James and John knew after that day on the mountaintop.

Mysterium Tremendum

The German theologian, Rudolph Otto in his classic book *The Idea of the Holy* called it *MYSTERIUM TREMENDUM*; the awesome, the unveiling, the experience of the presence of perfection.

We are entering the season of Lent beginning this Wed... this Ash Wednesday. Lent has to be more than reading about the journey. It is time to get on with it! It is time to seek after the God, El Shaddai, who transfigured Jesus and who is **still transfiguring** those who do truly seek that Divine Spirit.

Lenten disciplines:

fasting;

prayerfulness;

reading of Scripture and other devotional literature;

time spent in reflecting on our own life situations –

comparing where we are with where we sense God is calling us.....

These are all important to us – not to make us feel inadequate- but to us motivate forward.... to get us off our satisfied haunches and on up the mountain.

Where elation awaits us,

Where revelation awaits us,

Where deep satisfaction awaits us,

Where God awaits us.