

Questions for Jesus: Why Not?

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Luke 9:29-36

A pastor shares this story: “I know somebody who took off from work, extricated himself from daily family and other responsibilities, in order to walk the Appalachian Trail. It was going to be his time to ‘get away from it all.’ But, after less than two weeks on the trail, he came home, saying it was one of the most disarming experiences of his life. He just couldn’t take it any more. Why? In his words, ‘I got out there alone, in the woods, no distractions, nobody out there but me and God. All the time in the world to think about all the things I usually avoid thinking about. I just about went crazy.’”

Interesting...the demands of daily life can be so consuming. There are times when we feel that need to just get away. I have heard that said about Sunday worship. “It’s the one hour a week when I can just be alone with my thoughts, with my God. It is a time to recharge my batteries, to get away from the daily routine and get ready for the week ahead.” Sounds good to me: “Sweet hour of prayer, sweet hour of prayer that takes me from a world of care.”

But then there is the experience of the man on the Appalachian Trail. You go to the mountains, to the beach, to church, to get away from it all. But sometimes, in getting away, you find that what was supposed to be a retreat becomes engagement, encounter. For a moment you just want to close your eyes, to shut everything out, and instead find your eyes opened wider than they have ever been. Then what do you do? The man on the trail seemingly decided that the busyness and distractions of daily life were preferable to the unexpected encounters of solitude.

Could this be why the good Scandinavian Lutherans of Garrison Keillor’s, Lake Wobegon, Minnesota, actually dislike vacations? In his words, “Here in the Midwest, we all have long memories of suffering and pain because, for one thing, winter is so long. When it finally gets warm and beautiful, we try to relieve those painful memories of cold, of neglect, of darkness, anger, bologna sandwiches, stupidity and butterscotch pudding. So we try to heal ourselves by subjecting ourselves to intensely pleasurable experiences – mindless pleasure in the sun while wearing as few clothes as possible - sand, air, water, sun, grass, gin. But we were not brought up to experience pleasure. It doesn’t register on us. It’s like trying to write on glass with a pencil. We get into as few clothes as possible and the sight of ourselves depresses us. Sunlight makes us gloomy. We are not Mediterranean people. We are Lutheran people. Even the Catholics up here are Lutheran. And I don’t like to generalize about Lutherans but one thing that’s true of every single last one of them without a single exception is that the low point of their year is their summer vacation...We endure it and we come back from it vowing to be better people.” As I have said before, these are my people! I am these people!

Just never know about those times when we seek to get away from it all. Never know what might happen. I don’t think Jesus’ disciples were Scandinavian Lutherans, but when Peter, John and James go away with him for a weekend getaway up on the mountain, my guess is that what they got from that experience is no where close to what they expected. How often are you ready for an encounter with divine glory?

The Transfiguration of Jesus...the story is found in Matthew, Mark and Luke. And it is not an easy text. How to preach on this rather strange, mystical, almost unworldly story - the dazzling light, the change in Jesus, the appearance of Moses and Elijah – representing the law and the prophets - the cloud and then the heavenly voice. What is going on here? What can it possibly mean? Clearly in this text we are in the presence of a “thin place” – a place where the veil between this world and the next is so sheer that it feels like you can step right through; where the door is cracked open between this world and some other, brighter place where God is palpable, living presence. And so a retreat on a mountain becomes an encounter with the Holy. Again, what might it mean?

First, this is a story about Jesus and who he truly is. When the disciples come down from the mountain they know – we know – that Jesus is far more than just a nice guy who is also a great teacher and the teller of wonderful and memorable stories. They see his “glory”... “This is my Son, my Chosen. Listen to him.” Bottom line here is that our Christian faith really is about Jesus, it is about our courageous, outrageous, wild and crazy confession that in this Jew from Nazareth we have seen about as much of God as we can ever hope to see. Says one pastor, “God speaks to us in a number of ways: through nature, through the good words of other people, all that is good and wonderful about this world. But for Christians, God’s singular

self-communication is Jesus. If we want to see God, we must look to and listen to Jesus, our hope in life, in death, in life beyond death.” This is what is revealed on that mountain.

The disciples are hopeless in many ways. In all of the Gospels, they often seem to have the insight and understanding of broccoli, and that is an insult to the broccoli! So often they just don’t get it, which, honestly, is a comfort to me when I consider my own tepid discipleship and the number of times I don’t get it. But on the mountain, for a moment, in that thin place, they do get it. For a moment, doubts transfigure into faith, questions into answers, fears into reassuring peace. The cloud, the dazzling white garments, are all biblical ways of describing a transcendent moment, a moment when the veil is pulled back and the disciples, and us, see the full glory of Jesus. Indeed, they are aware of divine glory in just about everything.

But this text isn’t just about Jesus. The film, *My Life As a House*, released several years ago, is the story of a very dysfunctional family. While there is much that is unpleasant in the film, it does depict an amazing process of transformation. Sam is a rebellious teenage boy. The product of divorced parents, with serious issues, he finds his identity in bright blue hair, body piercings and illegal substances. George is Sam’s father. He is recently unemployed and has serious issues of his own. But he is committed to helping Sam turn his life around. He manages to convince Sam to assist him in building a house. As the house is being built, Sam’s self-esteem and sense of identity are also being built, becoming stronger and stronger. George can see the changes in Sam taking place and says to him, “Change can be so constant you don’t even feel the difference until there is one. It can be so slow that you don’t know your life is better or worse until it is. Or, it can just blow you away, making you something different in an instant.”

What we see up on the mountain is Christ’s power to blow us away, to make us something different, to transform us....the very presence and power of God within us and all around us. We become participants in the Transfiguration. We see who Jesus is, but we also see who we are, who we can be. And how do we respond?

Says Donna Claycomb, of Duke Divinity School, “We can walk down the mountain and revert to our ordinary ways and continue as selfish, carefree individuals. Or we can shine. We can permit others to see the clothing God has placed on our bodies, allowing God’s love to literally shine through our faces to all we meet. We can be transmitters of the Light, allowing God to penetrate past our muck and shine through our lives.”

Ah, to be able to see ourselves in Jesus’ shining light. To be able to shut out the cacophony of voices all around us and hear only him. To be able to cast aside our myriad false gods, to feel our confusion healed, and allow Jesus and only Jesus to be Lord of our lives. Sounds pretty good as we sit here on a Sunday. But it’s over so fast, there on the mountain. Despite our hopes, our prayers, the tangible presence of God seems to flee, the light fades, the touch of God upon our hearts does not linger. Just when we are beginning to enjoy the view from the mountaintop, the time comes to descend, to return to everyday life. And it can be tough...tough to believe and maintain the promise in the messy middle of things; tough to speak a word for peace in a gun-mad, war-mad world; tough to promise hope to a culture that seems so filled with mistrust and fear; tough to see the light in the midst of so much darkness. Down in the valley, far from the mountain, it can be tough to see how any ministry in Jesus’ name can long be sustained.

Garret Keizer, an Episcopalian lay minister, tells about a Holy Saturday Easter vigil held in his tiny Vermont parish. Only two people, a husband and wife, came for the service. As they huddled together in the old church, prayed, lit candles and followed the ancient liturgy, they could hear cars passing by outside, the voices of people, all oblivious to and not at all interested in the ancient hopes being spoken in the little chapel. “There we were,” he writes, “three people and a flickering light. The Lord is with us, or we are pathetic fools.”

He says it pretty well. Either the Lord is with us, or we are pathetic fools. Down in the valley, far away from the encounter on the mountain, buffeted by any number of storms, struggling with the very real challenges of life and with our own uncertainty and doubt, the world, indeed our own experience, can conspire to convince us that yes, we are pathetic fools. But, think back to the mountain. We have been given another angle of vision. We have seen the light, we have heard the voice. We have seen Jesus and ourselves for who we really are; have seen the cloud of God’s care hovering over us and heard the voice of God naming us. We have glimpsed a world sustained by love rather than by violence and power. We have seen it...the Glory. Now dare to believe it...Christ continues to shine through our faces and we are transfigured, transformed, forever changed. Thanks be to God.