

Listen First

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Exodus 34:

Luke 9:

If you walked the aisles of the card section in any store the past couple of weeks you'd know what today is about – Valentine's Day! We celebrate love in its most generic form, represented by a little guy called Cupid. One person said, "I don't understand why Cupid was chosen to represent Valentine's Day. When I think about romance, the last thing on my mind is a short, chubby toddler coming at me with a weapon." And please, don't forget the chocolates and flowers. Those are obligatory. I dare not come home without them.

What is far less known, even among many of the faithful, is that this Sunday is the day we remember the Transfiguration of the Lord. I haven't found a Hallmark card on that one. Not that one doesn't exist, of course, but if it does I'm not aware of it.

Luke invites us to the Mount of Transfiguration. Jesus had just spent time telling his friends that he was to go to Jerusalem to suffer and die. We know from other accounts that Jesus is not well received on this one. Peter's response is notorious. Taking Jesus aside, Peter begins rebuke him; "God, forbid it, Lord!" Jesus pushes back hard; "Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things." (Matthew 16: 21-23)

There's the rub. The disciples are out of sync with God. No wonder Jesus tags Peter as well as James and John, the two hotheads, and climbs the mountain to pray.

We all live in that tension between what we see and want from God and what God sees and wants from us. Our natural instinct is no different from Peter's, to filter life through the lens of self-interest. "God, forbid it, Lord!" Peter replies. What praying does is redirect the focus from us to God. Jesus knows that. And so up the mountain they go.

Something happens during this prayer time! While Jesus is praying "the appearance of his face changed and his clothes became dazzling white." Here we are put face to face with awe, mystery and power. The divine presence evokes such feelings. Moses comes down the mountain after being in God's presence unconscious of his radiance with the divine presence. So much did the radiant glory of the Lord transfigure Moses' face that he had to wear a veil. Lifted out of ourselves into the presence of God our perspective changes.

Appearing suddenly with Jesus are Moses and Elijah. Both were taken up into heaven and both are associated with the **messiahship** in Jewish tradition. Moses is connected to the law and Elijah to the prophets. Theologically, both the law and prophets testify to Jesus messiahship. The Old Testament points to Jesus and the New Testament confirms and validates the Old.

The conversation among Moses, Elijah, and Jesus centers upon his departure, “which” as Luke writes, “he was about to accomplish at Jerusalem.” One senses that this was the subject of Jesus’ prayer as was his teaching prior to this event. The final prayer of Jesus in Gethsemane, also in the presence of Peter, James, and John, dealt with this same theme. After all, why shouldn’t the approach of the crucifixion preoccupy Jesus’ thoughts in prayer? Just as his baptism validated the beginning of his ministry so the Transfiguration now confirms his divine call as the suffering servant as He turns his attention to Jerusalem where “The Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, chief priests, and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised.” (Luke 9:22)

It is during this conversation that our friends Peter, James, and John get involved. Luke tells us that they were weighed down, fighting sleep, just like in Gethsemane as well. Somehow they had stayed awake enough that they saw Jesus glory and Moses and Elijah with him.

Then they began babbling! Absolutely no focus or self-control, they try to take over the moment and preserve it. They have no clue or understanding of what is happening. “Master, Peter says, “It is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah,” and, as Luke adds, “ not knowing what he said.”

They are who they are! I like what Thomas Merton says; “For me to be a saint means for me to be myself.” One of the requirements in following Christ is to be our authentic self before God. “Each of us presents a unique mix of personality, outlook, gifts and weaknesses, as well as a unique history with Christ and with God.” (Grace Notes, Yancey, p. 40)

Bernado, in *Diary of a County Priest*, writes, “The word was but flesh and none of the journalists in that day knew what was happening.” Our celebrity culture loves to build Tabernacles around personalities. The big splash sells and becomes even bigger if God’s name, mixed in the human-centered spirituality of our day, grants it divine status.

Jesus will not allow himself to be created in our image. Yancey asks how Jesus would have fared in this day of mass media and high-tech ministry. The truth is that Jesus, who had supernatural power, tended to downplay it. Seven times in Mark he heals a person and says, “Tell no one!” He runs to find solitude when the crowds, pursuing him, hear Jesus say, “Very truly, I tell you, you are looking for me, not because you saw signs,

but because you ate your full of loaves. Do not work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures for eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you.” (John 6:26)

The seventy disciples Jesus sent out came back exclaiming joyfully, “Lord, in your name even the demons submit to us!” Jesus looks at them and says, “Nevertheless, do not rejoice at this; that the spirits submit to you, but rejoice that your names are written in heaven.” (Luke 10:20) Jesus is free of the “Messiah Complex” we attribute to an over obsession with fixing other peoples’ problems. He didn't try to convert or heal people who weren’t ready, showing an incredible respect for human freedom.

There is humor in what happens next. While babbling away “a cloud came and overshadowed them, and they were terrified as they entered the cloud.” Attention is refocused. They are being returned to the divine gaze. Richard Rohr emphasizes rightly that the divine presence cannot be controlled. It is a gift that can and should be asked for (Luke 11:13) but it is never about talking God into anything. We cannot make the gift of the Spirit dependent upon anything. For example, Protestants often make the Spirit depend upon a personal decision or faith as a technique. Orthodox and Catholics made the Holy Spirit depend on membership and sacraments. (Rohr, The Naked Now p.20) Overshadowed by the presence of God, we become aware that our lives are not our own, that God has been there all along awaiting our desire and willingness to be awakened. It is, after all, not about us and our need to control others, ourselves, or God. As Rohr rightly observes, “At this point, God becomes more a verb than a noun, more a process than a conclusion, more an experience than a dogma, more a personal relationship than an idea.” (Rohr, p. 23) Peter wanted to do something good for Jesus, to be sure. But our notions of good are often way off target.

The gospel comes to us, as we are, a mystery of transcendence often surprising us. We are pulled away from ourselves and what we’re doing for Jesus to a posture of listening to what Jesus wants to do for and through us. Walker Percy’s character in his novel, The Second Coming, reflects Christians who live untouched by the transcendent. Listen to what he says; “I am surrounded by Christians. They are, generally speaking, a pleasant and agreeable lot, not noticeably different from other people...But if they have the truth, why is it the case that they are repellent precisely to the degree that they embrace and advertise the truth?...A mystery: if the good news is true, why is not one pleased to hear it?” (Yancey, p. 95)

As Peter, James and John become enveloped by the cloud, “they become deeply aware of God.” “This is my Son, my Chosen, listen to him!” the voice bellowed. “Be still and know that I am God,” the Psalmist writes. (Psalm 46:10)

Often it is a matter simply of quieting down, stopping the babble, and posturing ourselves in silence before Jesus. He is not One among us, but One above all religious figures, pre-eminent, standing alone, the One worthy to be listened to. He is the light, the truth, the way and the life.

Henri Nouwen said toward the end of his life that prayer had become for him primarily a time of “listening for the blessing.” He said that “The real work of prayer is to become silent and listen to the voice that says good things about me.” (Yancey, p. 245)

Those three disciples found themselves in Someone Else’s grip. James Alison says that “mature transcendence is an actual ‘falling into’ and an ‘undergoing’ of God. God is done unto us,’ and all we can do is allow it.” (Rohr, pg. 18) We are anchored in a place ‘beyond all human praise and blame.’

True, such moments in life are brief. But in them we realize that all is grace, that we are loved, that all is forgiven. And in that moment the world is transformed. God is real. The universe is a friendly place. Instead of hiding reality, the Transfiguration reveals it.

Amazingly, you and I can potentially be God’s presence and reveal God to others as well. A person who ministers to the homeless tells what they hear from so much preaching in their world. A steady diet of hellfire and brimstone sermons. A constant dose of sin and worthlessness. What is the best gift one might offer? John says that, “I tell people who confront the homeless that eye-contact may be more important than food or money. They need to connect in some small way with another human being, someone who sees them as a person of worth.” (Yancey, pg. 254)

As God’s glory overcomes us, we see ourselves as those who are loved, persons created in God’s image, persons of worth. And that is truly transforming. Let us allow ourselves to be enveloped by God’s love, turning our ear to the voice from the cloud who says, “This is my Son, my Chosen, listen to him!”