

Transfiguration: An Alternate Understanding

Luke 9:28-36

February 18, 2007

Last week we looked at the beatitudes and realized that social location and personal situation often influence our interpretation of scripture. I have to say that I don't think that's all bad – in fact, its inevitable. Scripture doesn't change – it has said what is written here in these pages for thousands of years; yet as we come to it, depending on where we are and what is happening in our lives and in the world around us, we will find different insights and different meanings. I think that's what they meant at seminary when we were told that we should be able to preach one passage at least 8 different ways!

Take today's reading from Luke as an example. Today is the last Sunday in the season of Epiphany, the time when we look at passages that show us, manifest to us, that Jesus is the Christ of God. And we end up, in case we haven't understood before now, with this razzle dazzle passage – a laser show on the mountain. Jesus shines with the glory of God in the presence of Moses and Elijah – representatives of the law and the prophets – demonstrating that he is the culmination of God's revelation. And the amazed disciples first have visual confirmation and then verbal confirmation as they are told by God in no uncertain terms – “This is my Son, my chosen, listen to him!” So this passage can be interpreted as identifying and affirming for us that Jesus is the son of God.

As an example, On Day 1, an Ecumenical Radio program that features various pastors, this Sunday's sermon is given by The Rt. Rev. Charles F. Duvall, a retired Episcopal Bishop from South Carolina, who begins his sermon with these words: *Often in human life we find ourselves struggling to see something or someone in the dim murkiness of our lives and then a light shines, and we say, "Oh, now I can see clearly!" That kind of ah-hah moment happened to Simon Peter, James, and John on the mountain with Jesus. They thought they knew who Jesus was, but after this experience they saw him in a new light.* In other words, if you didn't know who Jesus was before, you do now all because of this spectacular event.

Another way to look at this passage is from the vantage point of discipleship. What does it mean to be a follower of Jesus Christ? Well, it means that mountain top experiences are necessary – we all need time to get away, to commune with God, to draw closer to Jesus, to be filled with the Spirit – but all good things must come to an end; we can't stay on the mountain top; we have to balance that time away with times down in the valley, times of service and sacrifice. There's a natural tendency to want to build those booths, like Peter did, but that's not what those experiences are meant to promote. As Steve Harper has put it in the book some of us read a year or so ago during Lent, “Personal holiness fosters and strengthens social holiness. . . . If we only inhale, we will explode. If we only exhale, we will be exhausted. If we only commune with God, we will become ‘spiritually bloated’; if we only exhale, we will become ‘spiritually depleted.’” (*Prayer and Devotional Life of United Methodists*, Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1999, p. 30. So this passage can also be interpreted as defining for us both the worship and service components of discipleship.

These two approaches are well plowed ground for me and for other preachers, and I expect for you as well. But because of a recent discussion in our Wednesday night book study a few weeks ago, for the first time in a long time, I have seen something else in this passage that I want to share with you today. A few weeks ago in response to what Marcus Borg has written in *The Heart of Christianity*, we got into a very good conversation about prayer – what is it, what is

it for, how does it work, is there such a thing as “intercessory prayer,” does God ever intervene as a result of prayer? I can tell you that these questions have been rolling around in my head ever since that conversation. And Borg’s explanation that he shared when I heard him speak last month didn’t exactly clear things up. He believes that God interacts with us but does not intervene. For me that seems like a matter of semantics; for him, it may be something more.

In today’s reading I think we can find some answers. Luke makes a point of saying the Jesus takes Peter, John, and James up the mountain so that he can pray. Prayer plays a very important part in Luke’s portrayal of Jesus – as Jesus prays after his baptism, the heavens are opened and he hears God’s voice “You are my son, the beloved; with you I am well pleased.” Then, filled with the spirit, Jesus goes into the desert to wrestle with temptation and to decide what it is he’s supposed to do and to be. Before he called his 12 disciples, Luke says “he went out to the mountain to pray and he spent the night in prayer to God.” Later, when confronted with crowds of hungry people, he took a few loaves and fishes, and prayed; he blessed God – not the food—we tend to bless food, but first century Jews blessed God, the giver of the food – something like “blessed are you Lord God of the Universe who brings forth wheat from the earth and fruit from the vine,” and then, after praying, he broke the bread and distributed it among the multitudes. And there was enough for everyone.

Just prior to today’s reading, Jesus prayed again. Luke says, “Once when Jesus was praying alone, with only the disciples near him, he asked them, ‘Who do the crowds say that I am?’” And he gets an answer that perhaps he wasn’t expecting – They say you’re John the Baptist; they say you’re Elijah; they say you’re one of the ancient prophets risen from the dead. In other words, the feedback Jesus gets is that the crowds think of him the same way we think of John the Baptist – as a forerunner of the Messiah who is yet to come.

That prompts Jesus to ask, “Well, who do you say that I am,” and of course Peter immediately responds, “You are the Messiah.” Right answer, wrong understanding. Jesus knows that Peter and the others still can’t comprehend who the messiah really is, the one who enters into the suffering of the world, not the one who rescues everyone from the suffering. And so he tells them to keep quiet.

Then in today’s reading, it’s in the evening about a week later, and Jesus went up the mountain to pray taking with his three closest disciples, Peter, John, and James, who doze off while Jesus prays. And while he is praying, his appearance is changed, and he finds himself in the company of Moses and Elijah, who discuss with him his “departure,” the Greek word is Exodus. What has occurred to me in this passage is that Jesus doesn’t change himself; God does it. Jesus doesn’t just decide he’s ready to shine in all his glory; it is who God changes his appearance. And Moses and Elijah appear to talk to him; but Jesus didn’t command them to appear.

We’re not told what Jesus is praying about when these things happen, but I wonder if he’s asking God about what’s next – is he on the right track – did he understand clearly back there at his baptism and when he was in the desert – people still don’t understand who he is and what he’s trying to do and maybe Jesus is a little unsure of himself at this point.

Now some people think that because Jesus is the incarnation of God, he knew all along what he was doing, and he just prayed and asked questions because he wanted his disciples to think he was human and he wanted to be a good example to them, but he really didn’t need to pray or ask questions. Well to me that’s false advertising. It means that Jesus was like Clark

Kent, that underneath his carpenter's robe he was dressed in a suit with a big "M" for Messiah on it, and he knew all the time who he was. And to me that's also deceptive – God trying to trick us into believing that Jesus is one of us. And frankly, I can't believe in a God who deceives.

I think Jesus in all his humanity is genuinely concerned, puzzled, disturbed. And so he prays. And in his praying God gives him assurance – in a powerful, undisputable way, God intervenes, or interacts, however you want to understand it, to show Jesus once again who he is – to confirm that he is definitely acting in accordance with God's will, and that he should continue on the same path he had described to his disciples and which they found so hard to believe.

This is a mountain top experience – but not the kind where we all sit around, toast marshmallows, and feel all warm and fuzzy while we sing Kum Bah Ah. This mountain top experience is about death. It confirms for Jesus that he was right when he told the disciples the harsh truth that he would undergo suffering, be rejected, be killed, and then on the third day be raised. Unequivocally, God is helping Jesus to understand that he is the fulfillment of the Law and the Prophets and his death will be the fulfillment of being the messiah.

In praying, God isn't changed; Jesus is changed. C. S. Lewis, in speaking with his friend Harry Harrington about the terminal illness of Lewis's wife Joy, said in response to his friend's hopeful comment, "God is answering your prayer," "That's not why I pray, Harry. I pray because I can't help myself. I pray because the need flows out of me all the time, waking and sleeping. It doesn't change God; it changes me." (Quoted in Tom Long, *Whispering the Lyrics*, Lima, OH:CSS Publishing Col, 1995, p.126)

When Jesus opens himself up to God in prayer, God changes Jesus. That Peter, John and James happen to see this event and to hear the voice of God is important, but perhaps secondary for God's primary focus is on Jesus.

It is interesting to note that it is not until the 11th chapter of Luke that the disciples get around to asking Jesus how to pray. They've seen him doing it all along, but they've hesitated. Maybe that's because they sense something we don't always appreciate. Prayer is powerful business. Eugene Peterson says "We want life on our own conditions. Praying puts us at risk of getting involved in God's conditions. Be slow to pray. Praying most often doesn't get us what we want but what God wants, something quite a variance with what we conceive to be in our best interest. And when we realize what is going on, it is often too late to go back. Be slow to pray." (Working the Angles, Grand Rapids: Erdmans, 1987, p. 44).

There are many different ways to understand this strange story of Jesus on the mountain top. We can understand it literally as a miraculous event in Jesus' life; we can understand it metaphorically as the early church's parable about the nature of Jesus and of discipleship. But as Borg has said, whether or not it happened exactly this way, we need to ask, "what does it mean." Thanks to our conversations together, I've come to see that among all the other interpretations that we are so familiar with, it might also mean that in our time of need, God hears our prayers and intervenes or interacts with us to change us and to strengthen us to be true to what God has called us to be and to do. Prayer doesn't change God; it changes us. Ultimately, "Prayer is communion with God. We speak to God, but God touches, embraces, shapes and changes us." and whatever we pray for, "our prayer is answered because in the act of praying we receive what we really seek and need – relationship with God. (Tom Long). Thanks be to God. Amen.