

February 11, 2018

Transfiguration Sunday: Coming Down the Mountain

2 Kings 2:1-12 Mark 9:2-9

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The story of the transfiguration-- the disciples' vision-- is a mountaintop experience of the sort we see in the tales of the Old Testament-- of Moses ascending Mt. Sinai through the smoke of God's fire and the prophet Elisha watching in wonder as "the chariots of Israel and its horsemen," take Elijah out of this world. This vision of the transfiguration, to which Jesus invited Peter and James and John, came at a crucial time for them. Jesus had just informed the disciples of his coming fate—that he would suffer, be rejected by the authorities and killed. They responded with shock and dismay. There was little comfort in his promise that he would rise up on the third day. Were they supposed to understand and accept that this ignominious suffering was the fate of the messiah? Almost in the same breath, the disciples were told that they too must be willing to be scorned and to sacrifice their own lives for the sake of the Gospel. Now, six days later, in the wake of this dark news, they find themselves privy to a shining vision. Jesus' presence is illuminated from within and his garments become whiter than white. Moses and Elijah appear with him and a voice out of a cloud speaks the now unquestionable reality, "This is my son, the Beloved... listen to him."

The disciples' vision appears for only a brief moment in their lives. They could not have anticipated it and it cannot be sustained. This brief moment is almost too powerful and they are terrified. A voice comes out of a cloud, and then suddenly, it is over and they follow Jesus down the mountain. Not only has the moment come to an end, but these devoted followers are instructed by Jesus to tell no one about their vision. In their offer to build dwellings for the holy ones before them, we see how badly they want to hold onto their experience, to house it, to contain it. When this offer is shot down they perhaps imagine that they will at least be able to fashion a

container of words-- to tell the story of what they have experienced—a story, whose telling will permit them to hold on tight to the vision. But Jesus instructs them, in no uncertain terms, to tell no one about what they have seen. Shakily, they come down the mountain, and, in a daze, return to their everyday lives. Now they must face their mundane responsibilities. They must live with their unanswered questions, and the doubt, fear, and grief that will soon come. But they have experienced a shining vision—an eternal moment that time cannot erase or that uncertainty cannot deny. They stood on a pinnacle in the radiant presence of a theophany (an appearance of the divine) that will remain with them forever.

The ancient Hebrews, Greeks and Christians placed great value on the heights. Moses received the “Ten Commandments” on the mountain, the Greek Gods rewarded people by tossing them into the sky where they could be permanently remembered as constellations, and Jesus gave his “Sermon on the Mount.” Our modern language continues to reflect our love affair with the lofty over the lowly. An adult is a person who has “grown up.” When we are happy, we are said to be in “high spirits.” When someone begins to achieve worldly success, they are referred to as “a rising star.” When someone is sad we say they are “down in the dumps.” When someone’s health fails we say they are “going downhill.”

And yet, this story of the transfiguration doesn’t stop with a description of a mountaintop vision, but with what takes place after the vision-- while coming down the mountain. As their collective pulse slows down to a normal pace and their breathing resumes, Jesus orders them to tell no one what they have seen, “until after the Son of Man has been raised from the dead.” The rest of Jesus’ ministry and his tutoring of the disciples will take place before this foretold event. Going downhill is the beginning of a very productive time. The Gospel takes us to the mountaintop but religious life takes root when we descend the mountain

Going downhill presents a great spiritual challenge, but at the same time, creates a powerful opportunity for every human soul. When you think about it, all human life begins with a pretty terrifying down hill journey. We literally slide head first from our mother's womb, at birth, diving down into this pool of life. We descend into life, wet and slippery and vulnerable. The mountaintop the disciples got to glimpse and the one which most of us yearn to reach in our lives isn't a faint imaginative future dream. The mountaintop was our original home. We started out on the mountaintop, in the realm of the spirit, and as infants in utero, the spirit incarnates (comes into the body) and descends into earthly life. For our allotted time here, our primary task is to seek our destiny in our spiritual roots. Our future is actually a return to our beginning.

In the Jewish mystical tradition that underlies both Judaism and Christianity there is a symbol that is helpful in getting our imaginations around this idea and that is the tree of the Kabala. Two different symbols of the Tree of Life are used: one is right side up as we see a tree with our normal vision but the other, curiously, is upside-down.

This upside down tree has its roots in heaven and its trunk descends down into earthly life and human affairs. It emanates out of a divine world of unity and light and as it descends, its branches spread. This is an image of the soul as it moves into the world. Here, in its spreading branches we feather our nests and eat our worms. Well, anyway, we live out our ordinary human lives. We have families and relationships and work, we run governments and educate children. We create art and music and literature, and make scientific discoveries and heal the sick. We also suffer anxiety, ill health and betrayal. We destroy ecosystems and build empires on the broken backs of those who are less powerful and lead the innocent into wars, wars in which their suffering is often the greatest. This worldly life, which we casually call "secular" is actually the branching of a tree that has deep roots in the spiritual world.

We all know what it means to “grow up” -- facing the unnerving challenges of youth as we move into adulthood, but take an imaginative leap with me for a moment. I propose that the far greater challenge confronting us as human beings is that of “growing down.” What does this mean? When a human being becomes aware that the end of his life was somehow mysteriously at work from the very beginning, she grows down and the strong roots of the tree of the Kabala allow the branches to spread with the magnificence of depth. We grow down when we take an honest look into the depths of our hearts and psyches and understand our motivations, impulses and internal contradictions and fess up to our flaws, our prejudices, our vulnerability and the wounds that we carry. This growing down makes integrity and wisdom and compassion possible. We grow down into the fullness of our being. And though we remain fragile and faulty, we also become unique and authentic and holy. We grow down when a sense of our future destiny guides us in the living of our lives today.

In times of crisis or points of radical change in our lives such as life threatening illnesses or accidents or the breaking of a bond with one we love, or some other traumatic event, people frequently describe a powerful moment in which they experience their lives flashing before their eyes. Though these moments are available to us anytime, it is these crisis times that startle us into recognition and remembrance of them. Suddenly, specific memories of people, conversations, and events out of our life histories surface with astonishing clarity and intensity. Why do these memories stand out instead of others? Perhaps these are “transfigured” moments which shine out of the past because they are the ones in which we felt we had responded to our fate pulling us in one direction or another. These moments surface because they each have a message for us.

Jesus heard the call of his future. He knew his fate. He would suffer and be rejected by authorities and be crucified. Mark tells us that Jesus knew he was living into the

cross. When I reflect on the cross as a symbol of Jesus' fate it again brings to mind the upside-down tree of the Kabala. With its roots in heaven, Christ's suffering on this tree had purpose and meaning. Holy sacrifice was the destiny he was called to grow down into.

When someone we love dies, we sense the power of this moment at the end of life to awaken our dulled consciousness and to pause our frenzied pace. We feel a strong urge to speak about him or her or to listen to others do so. A public eulogy goes far beyond honoring the life of the individual being remembered. It reaches down deeply into the souls of all gathered. The end of a life awakens us to its transfiguring moments. When we speak of our remembered impressions of a cherished person we are trying to express how their life journey was their attempt to be faithful to their destiny. This is how we honor them. A memorial to them that accomplishes this helps all the mourners "grow down" a bit more deeply into their own lives.

Jesus claimed his destiny and its spiritual power for his life. His followers sensed it. The chosen disciples saw it in the brilliant vision of the transfiguration on the mountain. We have received it in the Gospel accounts of his life and words. Jesus' awareness of his destiny transfigured his life. Our sensitivity and our faithfulness to our fate can transfigure our own. No matter how far along we are in years, we can ask, "What are we still being called to see and be in this life?" This week, with the beginning of Lent, coming down the mountain is the soulful challenge before each of us. As we enter this season of the cross--a meditative season of the church year--I invite each of you to dwell on the image of the tree of the Kabala and, like this upside down tree, branch out into your own depths and your own destiny.