

“Thin Places”

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Transfiguration Sunday

Mark 9:2-9

February 19, 2012

2 Kings 2:1-12; Psalm 50:1-6; 2 Corinthians 4:3-6

We hold this sacred story in the ordinary hands of our humanity and it reminds us of the delicate balance between heaven and earth because in every ordinary moment there is a reminder that the Divine is present and waiting to be unveiled.

Need an example? Robert Johnson begins his book with a simple line: “It all began with the crash of a car against a brick wall and the small knee of an eleven-year old boy caught in between.” The wreck pinned him against a wall and his life hung in the balance for a few days. The car wreck took both legs as the accident occurred before antibiotics and he battled gangrene. When he was perilously close to death, he had a vision of what religious scholar Mircea Eliade called “the golden world,” a mystical world just beyond the doorway of death. One glimpse and Johnson longed for it more than for the present world, not caring whether he returned to life and family and friends.

Johnson called his recovery “a harsh intrusion, a summons back to the earthly realm.” He wrote later that over the years he longed for a full experience of that which he had had only a brief glimpse. In reflection about the wreck, Johnson claimed this near-death experience was a wound deep enough to set off a deep experience of the inner world but not so deep as to take his life. His near-death experience had taken him to a thin place where the curtain separating this world from the world to come was unexpectedly pull apart for just a brief moment.

I

The season of Epiphany comes to an end today but my, it ends in a bang, doesn't it? Jesus climbs to the top of the mountain to pray with three of the disciples and unexpectedly, in the elevated heights of the mountaintop the shades of heaven part and the glory of heaven shines upon him. The mighty voice of God marks the Divine Presence that overshadows the moment telling them: *Stop jabbering about inconsequential things ... listen!*

To be honest, most of us live so much of our existence in the valley of ordinary life we don't know much about what it means to occasionally venture up to the thin air of the mountaintop where transcendence is felt. The Dalai Lama once observed that the most spiritual persons on this planet live in the highest places. We're not like that ... extraordinary people that live up on the heights where extraordinary things happen. After all, we're ordinary people living ordinary lives in more ordinary places.

But ordinary people sometimes do extraordinary things in the everyday commitment they make to the simplicity of what they do well. If you open your eyes to it, you'll see it often it will amaze you. I was called out several years ago to pray with a man and his partner who was dying of HIV-AIDS in a nearby nursing home that specializes in care for persons who are dying from diseases like that. In that place, I watched the nursing staff and was reminded what a gift they are to the dying. Understand this was not a place of healing; rather it was a place where men came to die.

Nevertheless, it was ably staffed with nurses who offered the very best in care of the whole person. They dispensed dignity and honest care along with necessary medications for their clients. It was a gift to see ordinary persons doing extraordinary things. Some of you have the gift to get things done in the world and others have come to see how much you add to the rest of us. But by and large, we are ordinary folks with a wide array of ordinary gifts and our experiences in life are mostly that: ordinary.

So how do we "ordinary folks" approach this extraordinary story of Jesus who stands on the top of a windy mountain and is a part of a very small audience to a special effects show that not even Hollywood could duplicate? What is described in this gospel story is something extraordinary that we ordinary folks aren't quite sure what to do with it. What did it mean to Peter, James and John? What did it mean to Jesus? And what does it mean to us?

II

Take notice in this story the actual presence of God comes face to face with our human experience and out of the sheer awe of the moment a man comes away literally glowing from the encounter.

The first time this happened, the children of Israel were refugees fleeing Egypt with only those things they could carry with them. In the exodus, they left everything and followed Moses in a frantic rush for the sea. Once God miraculously delivered them across the sea and conquered their pursuers by the release of the great waters, they found themselves on the eastern edge of the sea. From there, Moses led them down in the Sinai Desert where they stopped to camp at the base of the great mountain that dominated the Sinai.

When Moses descended the mountaintop with the law of God under his arms, he reentered the camp of his people with a glow that was so strong they begged him to put a veil over his face in order to keep from frightening them. His hair looked as if it was on fire and he had a transcendent look that no one had ever seen before.

I think the story indicates that while the people shuddered with absolute terror in meeting God in such close proximity, Moses approached the sheer terror of God with absolute safety and calm. Isn't that the way it is for most of us? Approaching God can be a terrifying thing. All we can think about are all the reasons why God has something against us. But being face to face with God can be the safest place on earth if we're ready.

Jesus' mountaintop encounter was very similar to that of Moses. Out of the blue Moses and Elijah, representing the Law and the Prophets, joined Jesus. While standing there, Peter, James and John, all wake with a start as if from a deep sleep to see Jesus conversing with Moses and Elijah. The three of them stand there under the heavenly glow and the vision of the three of them stuns the disciples. Jesus is aglow with the luminescence that Moses experienced all those centuries before.

The disciples were dumbstruck at first but they overheard what was being said between Jesus and the towering twins from the Old Testament. Moses and Elijah came to visit with Jesus about his future and about his departure from this earthly existence.

Maybe that explains the voice of God intruding the scene. Just as soon as Peter blurted out the only thing he could think of, namely, that they should build three booths on the heights of the mountaintop, God interrupted Peter to stop his inane babbling. God overruled the noise of Peter's nervousness by booming out a message that Jesus heard while rising out of the waters of his baptism: "*This is my son, my Chosen; listen to him!*"

Whatever he thought about the direction of his life up to this point, from this moment on, he knew he had come so he would die. Where there was a need for a veil with Moses, there was now no need for a veil at all and the three disciples were left there with their mouths open and the shining glow of being near to the very face of God.

III

I suppose it was the voice of God's blessing that gave Jesus the strength to leave the mountaintop. Jesus knew that after the Transfiguration, he must head back down into the valley of human need. But before he left, God gave him bread for the journey. God spoke to the affirmation of his existence and gave him the blessing he needed in order to leave the mountaintop.

But what about us? When we find ourselves caught in the glow of the presence of God, we either start looking for a veil to hide behind or we start filling the silence with our unwanted thoughts. We try to fill the holiness of the moment with our thoughts and projects when really we ought to honor the moment with silence and accept what message God may be trying to offer us.

C.S. Lewis playfully observes there comes a time when the children who have been playing at burglars hush suddenly: "Was that a *real* footstep in the hall?" they wonder. Then he adds that there's a moment when people who have been dabbling at faith suddenly draw back. "Suppose we really found Him?" they wonder in amazement. "We never meant it to come to *that!* Worse still, supposing He had found us?"

The truth of the matter is that on occasion, when we least expect it, God may break through the ordinariness of our lives to give us an extraordinary experience of affirmation and direction. In that moment we may experience as sheer terror, we are invited to lift the veil that

separates us from hearing all God has to say and we are invited first hand to experience the presence of God so that we might receive the bread for our journey.