

Exodus 24:12-18
Matthew 17:1-9

“A Mystery to be Enjoyed”
(Transfiguration)
Daniel D. Robinson, Pastor

R.P.C.
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Contemporary poet, W. H. Auden once said that it “helps to be a poet if you want to be a Christian.” By that statement, I think he meant that the Christian faith makes peculiar demands on our ability to fully understand, for the Christian faith does not always make complete, rational sense. So that means, in order to be a Christian, it helps to have a well developed imagination, and an appreciation for the wonder and power of the word, as well as an appreciation for the mysteries of life, as poets tend to do. Facts, figures and precise scientific measurements and proof do not always serve well to solve the great mysteries and wonders of the Christian faith. So, that makes me wonder if we are ‘poets enough’ to accept the account we hear in today’s gospel.

We have just addressed Matthew’s account of how Jesus took three of his disciples up on a mountain. And, as we were reminded by the previous text from Exodus, mountains in the Bible, are often favorite locations to encounter and be encountered by God. Hence we have this wonder-filled Biblical account of Moses as he ascends Mount Sinai to receive God’s law. A cloud, symbolizing God’s holy and mysterious presence, covers the mountaintop for six days; then on the seventh day, Moses enters the cloud, and after forty more days and nights, he receives the stone tablets inscribed with the words of the Ten Commandments...

That passage is followed by our text from Matthew about another mountain and another strange cloud signaling God’s presence. This time Jesus’ disciples hear a voice declaring, *“This is my Son, the beloved; with whom I am well pleased; listen to him.”* Likewise in this text, the disciples get to see Jesus transfigured – that is, mysteriously transformed – before their very eyes.

These are strange, mystical visions we have been presented today which might be better expressed by poetic language than by simple, direct prose. Since we are modern, early 21st century people, we might have some difficulty believing these accounts. I mean, how can we rational people believe such a mystical occurrences? What is the point of all this mystery? How can this possibly be relevant to us and our lives? How can we ever be expected to UNDERSTAND such mysteries?

I think we begin by admitting that as modern people, we may actually be limited in our ability to UNDERSTAND these mysterious accounts - at least on a

rational level. As modern, enlightened people, we have been conditioned to think that, given enough facts and enough time, we are perfectly capable of understanding just about anything. As modern, enlightened people we are not limited by legend, or superstition, or ignorance, that so inhibited the thinking of our fore-bearers. We moderns can therefore stand up and look out upon the world with totally unlimited vistas. After all, we are rational, scientifically minded folks who have the capacity to grasp almost anything to which we put our minds. We've been in space – to the moon even; why we have mastered computer technology. So one of the promises of this age is that we can always come up with some methodology – the application of some reasoning – that will enable us to think clearly about anything, and solve any challenge through the power of reason.

But that is precisely where the problem arises: Christianity is a “revealed faith,” not a ‘reasoned, scientifically provable religion.’ The Christian tradition affirms that our best revelations do not come as the result of applied reason, or analytical study of data. Christian faith is rather a gift from God – it is a revealed faith. And that is why, for us modern thinking-types, an event like the transfiguration of Jesus frankly eludes us. We are frustrated by this event because we cannot measure it, or prove it, or capture it on our cell phones and then instant-message it, or face-book it. In fact, we have difficulty believing it because reason alone cannot comprehend it.

So what this might suggest to us, is that we moderns, here at the beginning of this new century, are actually still quite limited after all! It may well be that our infatuation with facts and figures and data – our utter dependence upon empirical proof for everything, has in fact, shrunk our vision instead of expanding it.

There is more happening with you and me and the world than reason alone can grasp. Don't we still have a deep yearning for a deeper understanding than the sciences offer? Isn't our reality more than simply what science, or psychology, or sociology, or medicine, or politics says our reality is? Surely we are more than a mass of cells under a microscope, or an experiment in a vast Petri dish, or a battery of psychological exams, F-CATS, SAT's or GRE's. Isn't there more going on in our world that even the totality of all of that? Isn't there more going on in US than can be rationally or scientifically tested or explained?

Maybe that is why you are here today. Maybe you, like me have some inarticulate, but nevertheless real desire for a wider understanding of the things around us – and a deeper understanding of the self. We might not be able to

verbalize that desire in those exact terms. But we might find ourselves saying, “I wish I knew more ... I wish I understood myself more...” “Surely my life is not simply some psychological problem to be solved, or a physiological mass to be nourished and nurtured, but my life is a mystery to be enjoyed.” It’s just like the psalmist expressed it: “It was you who created my inmost self, and put me together in my mother’s womb; for these mysteries I thank you: for the wonder of myself...”

There is a mystery to the world and to myself, and once in a while we are given a glimpse – just a glimpse of something that is beyond the measurable and beyond description. So maybe of the most helpful things about the church is that it provides a sanctuary where we can behold the mysteries. Here we can safely venture forth into that little-discussed and little -appreciated territory called Spirit.

Another psalmist told us, “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.” That word FEAR offered in our translations needs to ‘unpacked’ for we moderns. Fear in this context has nothing to do with a Stephen King novel or movie. It rather means respect for God, born of a sense of awe or wonder. It is the full acknowledgement that we did not create ourselves. We are here as living and breathing, hoping and loving, working and dying creatures made from God’s creative spirit. Thus, the life we live is a gift from God – the very breath of God.

Since we did not make ourselves, it would follow then that we are not masters of our own fate, the sole controllers of our lives and destinies. Our culture tells us otherwise however: Each commercial and advertisement tells us we are our own – that we should do exactly as we please and put self and self-gratification first – that we need and deserve all things that are pleasing.

But John Calvin began his statement of the summary of Christian life with the premise that “we are not our own” – we are God’s people and we belong to God. That’s hardly a statement that we moderns want to snuggle up to. To suggest that we are not our own, but belong to God seems far too limiting to us. It means we are not ultimately in control of our lives. It means we are not as free as we once thought ... that we are accountable. It means we cannot always be sure as to what God has in mind for us. It means there are things we will likely never understand; so maybe the “fear of the Lord” truly is a fearful, yet awe-filled experience.

Surely the “fear of the Lord” both as fright and awe was the experience on the Mount of Transfiguration. Jesus took Peter and James and John up on that high place for an encounter with God. There Jesus was transfigured – mysteriously

transformed right before them. They thought they UNDERSTOOD the meaning of it all. Poor Peter even offers a suggestion for DOING something – building three shrines – one for Jesus, one for Moses, one for Elijah. It was a typically human response – build something visible as empirical proof....

But a voice thunders from the mysterious cloud and declares Jesus as the “Beloved”. And the only demand put upon the disciples was not to build something, but to “listen to him” - not to act, but to simply BE, and take in the mystery and wonder of it all. And when the cloud and voice disappear, Jesus simply touches them, saying, “Get up and do not be ... afraid.” Don’t be frightened; rather ‘savor the mystery.’

God comes in the world not solely as a cloud of great mystery. God is not always revealed through a thunderous voice from heaven. God also choose to be revealed through a hand that is gently laid on our shoulder and a whisper, “Do not be afraid, for I AM in control, and I UNDERSTAND all things.” God so often comes us quietly and gently through revelation, so that may receive not rational understanding, but wisdom. The measureless spirit of power and wisdom that made the heavens and the earth, is concentrated in the hand of God who reaches out and touches us to reveal the mysteries, allowing us not to solve them... *but to enjoy them.*

She started coming back to church after a lengthy absence, and had been in worship the past several Sundays. Since she was the last one to leave the sanctuary that day, the pastor stopped her to ask what had brought her back after such a long absence.

“A feeling,” she said. “A feeling of being drawn toward something or someone... a feeling of which I wasn’t even aware until last Sunday.”

“Last Sunday?” the pastor asked. “What was special about last Sunday?”

“Well it was toward the end of the service,” she began. “We were all standing there, as usual, and the choir was singing the choral response after the benediction... and I know this sounds strange, but I kind of got ‘taken up.’”

“Take up? What do you mean by that?” pressed the pastor.

“Like ... taken away; like I sort of lost a consciousness of what was around me, or maybe I gained a different consciousness... It was as if I was standing all alone in the sanctuary and I felt as if I was surrounded by a warm, soft, wonderful light. When I came out of it, the choir was still singing, and the people were still standing all around me, so the experience lasted only a moment. But I had to sit down to regain my composure. And I couldn’t help but smile because I knew - just knew that God was present. I didn’t understand what happened, but I believed!”

In a sense that is precisely what happened to the disciples who went up that mountain with Jesus that day. Maybe they were thinking they were climbing that mountain to get a better view of the world, a better understanding of their position. But they got much more than what they expected. There they were, walking alongside Jesus, who from all appearances looked fairly much like them – a man among men – a fellow Jew – a gifted teacher perhaps.

But on that mountain, he was transfigured – mysteriously transformed right before their eyes. They caught a vision – just a glimpse – and yet they were privileged to receive a revelation from God. Then they heard a voice coming from a mysterious cloud. *For one moment* the tough crust of mundane reality was peeled back and they saw Jesus as the long-promised, long-awaited Messiah – the Christ. Then the cloud and voice disappeared, and Jesus touched them to dispel their fear. When they walked back down that mountain they walked back into a very different world – a world now considerable more expansive - beyond what even reason and their minds would allow.

So are we good enough poets to be Christians? Can we savor the power and wonder of words and appreciatively behold the wonders? Can we refrain from seeking insight and simply pause to behold the sight itself? Can we simply enjoy the mystery without analyzing or rationalizing it?

In a few moments we will be given an invitation and opportunity to behold such a wonder - we will be gathering at our Lord's Table. A couple of decades ago there was a debate in the Presbyterian Church as to whether or not children should be admitted to the Lord's Table before they made profession of faith. Those opposed argued that children are too young to reason and understand what this table represents. Others argued that none of us – not one of us can or ever will UNDERSTAND... Who can truly understand so amazing a grace and so great a love, given to us by God?

So today, let's be poets let's be children filled with wonder. Let's partake and savor the mystery..... Amen.