

Text: Luke 9: 28-36
Title: Drowsy before the Divine
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Researchers at the University of Pennsylvania launched a study to determine what kinds of articles get e-mailed the most frequently. For more than six months they checked the New York Times website every 15 minutes and analyzed thousands upon thousands of articles. They assessed controlling factors ~ like the placement of the article on the screen or the time of day. They used computer algorithms to track the ratio of emotional words in an article and to assess their relative positive or negative effect. They took samples of thousands of articles and used independent readers to help identify qualities like, “practical value” or “surprising.” They asked the question: Which stories do people want to share and why?

Now, granted, this was the New York Times so maybe the results were skewed by a certain kind of reader, but the researchers were surprised by what they discovered. They didn’t uncover a vast liberal conspiracy to undermine free market capitalism with socialism. They didn’t find that the titillating or the torrid was what people passed on. They didn’t find that the most popular articles were things like: “How your Pet’s Diet Threatens your Marriage and why its Bush’s Fault.”

What they did find was that readers wanted to share articles that inspired awe. The most common underlying theme to the articles that were forwarded was ~ awe. They defined awe as “an emotion of self-transcendence, a feeling of admiration and elevation in the face of something greater than the self.” And, they used two criteria for an awe-inspiring story: its scale was large and it required some manner of “mental accommodation.” It required the reader to view the world in a different way. As the researchers wrote:

It involves the opening and broadening of the mind... Seeing the Grand Canyon, standing in front of a beautiful piece of art, hearing a grand theory or listening to a beautiful symphony may all inspire awe. So may the revelation of something profound and important in something you may have once seen as ordinary or routine, or seeing a causal connection between important things and seemingly remote causes.

What a wonderful discovery.

Oh sure, people may still forward articles because they want to impress their friends with how erudite and high brow they are, but the researchers suggest something loftier, something nobler, some more evangelical. Again, in their words:

Emotion in general leads to transmission, and awe is quite a strong emotion....If I’ve just read this story that changes the way I understand the world and myself, I want to talk to others about what it means. I want to proselytize and share the feeling of awe. If you read the article and feel the same emotion, it will bring us closer together.

The story of the transfiguration ~ forwarded by Matthew, Mark, and Luke ~ is a story of awe. I am not sure that the intention of the gospel writer ~ or the rightful intention of a sermon ~ is to take this bizarre and baffling text and whittle it down to some clear point that has practical application for what you do on Tuesday afternoon. Rather, there is something here that is mysterious, transcendent, luminous, and bigger than us. There is something here that is awe-full.

Clearly the disciples were buffaloed.

First of all, they're dozing. They went up the mountain to pray and they fell asleep. When they wake, baffled and bewildered, they don't know what to do. The text reads that their sleep was hard to shake. The word has the sense of weight ~ the sleep was heavy. Maybe as the disciples woke up to three shiny men they thought they were still dreaming. Peter starts blabbering away like a busybody ~ trying to do something helpful like build a campground. But, bemused and befuddled, even he doesn't know what he is doing.

As one scholar puts it:

All that is missing is the cosmic hand, reaching down to give Peter a good "you-are-missing-the point" slap upside the head. One might imagine God's annoyance that Peter didn't have sense enough to remain silent at such a moment. If Moses was told he couldn't see God and live, perhaps Peter should have been told that he couldn't see God and talk so much.

What a wonderful scene.

What a scene full of wonder and mystery and awe.

Makes you want to forward it to others.

Dear friends, I would suggest that we all want moments of bright shining awe. There is a deep human desire for the luminous in-breaking of God ~ a longing to be caught up in something that is bigger than us, something that confirms our creatureliness, something that causes us to reconfigure, grow, and enlarge our sense of self, world, purpose, and the divine....

I've always wanted a different experience with God than what I've been dealt. I have always wanted something that wasn't so muted, muddled, and messed up. I've wanted God to wrench me out of my drowsiness and break in a way that was unmistakable, transcendent, transfiguring, and life changing.

Truth be told I've wished for the worship fervor of evangelicals ~ to be caught up in some kind of enraptured praise-gasm. I've wanted a Merton mysticism ~ to know a still silent centered encounter with God. I've wished for the unshakable foundational certainty of fundamentalists. I've wanted the free-wheeling dancing joy of Pentecostals. Whatever they were experiencing; I've wanted some of it.

But, more often than not I'm drowsy with doubt and indifference before the Divine. Maybe that is part of why this text is so engaging. It taps into that longing for awe and the glory of God.

It has been called “the Mount Rushmore of heaven -- the Lawgiver, the Prophet, and the Messiah – wrapped in such glory it is a wonder the other three could see them at all.” And, there are layers upon layers of theological meaning, images of the exodus and foreshadows of the resurrection. There are allusions to Moses on the mountain top, light shining through faces, and God speaking in a cloud. There is a kind of high level cabinet conversation about the departure of Jesus. And, the word for departure here is the same word used for exodus. They are talking about glory of God as exodus ~

exodus for the enslaved,
exodus from sin,
exodus from addiction,
exodus from whatever dehumanizes,
exodus from death.

The glory of God is on display and light is breaking out all over and the disciples are rubbing sleep out of their eyes and the transcendent God is unmistakably self-authenticatingly present..... Awesome! (I don't say “awesome” very often.....)

But, we don't get many moments like that. We live by a dappled light in a messy world. Most of us do without the benefit of epiphanal moments of transfiguration light. On our best days we are simply doing the best we can with what we've got and we tend to get moments of muted transcendence.

The light of a morning sun over water,
the joyful beauty of a child running across a field of a freshly mowed grass,
the beauty of music that washes over you making your hair stand on end your eyes pool up with water,
the stunning silence of a sky of stars over a desert mountain.

Or, maybe we catch the image of God shining back at us in another person.
But, as Adam Thomas puts it:

Over the years, however, our luminosity tends to fade. Every inhospitable word spoken, every neighbor mistreated and every resource hoarded layers grime over our radiance. Every hand unextended, every gift squandered and every road not taken leaves layers of apathetic dust. The world tells us that the radiant things out there are things we purchase. “When you wear the shiny stone or drive the shiny car, you too will shine.” Too often we cede our light to the glossy detritus of the world and forget that we are the ones God made to shine.

So, where then are the moments of awe? Where does transcendence tumble in?
If it is muted and muddled in creation and creature where does God's glory break in?

The testimony of scripture is that Jesus illumines the face of God.

If you want to see God look in the face of Jesus. If you want to see divinity it is pushing through the surface of Jesus. God is shining through his skin. We encounter God in that light. For, in Jesus, the image of God is not smudged, not diluted, not diminished, and not defective, but clear, unmistakable, and self-authenticating.

I don't know where else to look to see God as clearly.

And, if God is clearly illumined when Jesus' face is glowing, then God is just as clearly illumined, when Jesus looks over Jerusalem and weeps,
when Jesus teaches,
when Jesus breaks bread with friends,
when Jesus suffers on the cross,
when Jesus breaths his last.
Even there glory breaks in.

Dear friends, there is that odd moment midstream in the transfiguration when Peter is hollering into the light about putting up some tents. And we can surmise that, while it might be another reference to Jewish history, what Peter really wants to do is capture the moment. He wants to capture this clear image of God shining in the face of Jesus. But, the "true folly" (Scott Hoezee) of Peter's suggestion is that what he wants to capture has been with him from the very first day that Jesus walked up to his fishing boat.

In the first chapter of the Gospel of John the same word for tenting or dwelling is used to describe God's presence in the Word made flesh. There was no need to build a tent; God had set up his tent in the flesh of Jesus. And, so we keep coming back to look for God ~

in the face of Jesus,
in the teaching of Jesus,
in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus,
in the baptism of Jesus,
in the sacramental memory of Jesus,
in the community of Jesus.

And whether in church or classroom or funeral home or office cubicle or AA meeting or lonely restless night, if you are looking for God, if you want to encounter God, if you long for awe ~ look to Jesus.

In the words of Fleming Rutledge:

Even as the preacher stands before you bent and crippled by sin like the all the rest of humanity, the message is that the light of redemption has dawned upon us all in the journey of the Son of God through death into life. It is true on the brilliant days but even more true on the cloudy ones when faith is tested and hope is nearly dead: the very glory of God shines in the face of Jesus of Nazareth. He dies and he shines for you.

Thanks be to God.
Amen.