

Sunday, February 26, 2017

Rev. Robert W. Brown

The Ordinary Mystic

Matthew 17:1-9

INTRODUCTION:

In the time of Jesus, in his hometown of Nazareth, there was a Jewish tax collector named Levi. Tax collectors were considered to be despicable reprobates by their neighbors. They not only inflated tax payments for their own gain but also were traitorous agents who willingly worked for the Roman oppressors. All tax collectors were despised and widely shunned by the community.

One day, Jesus happened upon Levi sitting in his tax collector's booth. Jesus invites Levi to join his crew as a disciple! Immediately Levi agrees! He closes up shop and then throws a huge, all night house party. All his tax collector buddies joined in along with a host of Nazareth's most notorious outcasts and rabble-rousers. Think frat house pledge week.

It must have been quite a night because all of the good people in town were shocked and scandalized by Jesus partying the night away with *those* kinds of people. They probably told Mary all about it.

It turns out that Levi also goes by the name Matthew and Matthew stuck with Jesus from that day forward. In the years that followed Jesus' execution, Matthew was compelled to write a memoir of his adventures with Jesus, known to this day as The Gospel of Matthew. In today's story from the Gospel of Matthew we read about a most peculiar event called "The Transfiguration" which means to completely change form or appearance into a more beautiful or spiritual state. It's a momentary transformation from human to divine form.

Listen to Levi's... I mean Matthew's account of this paranormal phenomenon as recorded in chapter 17.

Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and his brother John and led them up a high mountain, by themselves. And he was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became dazzling white. Suddenly there appeared to them Moses and Elijah, talking with him. Then Peter said to Jesus,

“Lord, it is good for us to be here; if you wish, I will make three dwellings here, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.”

While he was still speaking, suddenly a bright cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud a voice said,

“This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!”

When the disciples heard this, they fell to the ground and were overcome by fear. But Jesus came and touched them, saying,

“Get up and do not be afraid.”

And when they looked up, they saw no one except Jesus himself alone...

As they were coming down the mountain, Jesus ordered them,

“Tell no one about the vision until after the Son of Man has been raised from the dead.”

~~~~~

(We hear the theme music to X Files TV show)

“The Truth Is Out There.” Are there any *X Files* fans in the house? The long running TV show was all about mystery and paranormal phenomena. As in all good drama there was constant dualistic tension. Agent Scully’s fact based science pitted against the obsessive curiosity of her partner, Fox Mulder, who was open to all possibilities of mystery. For Mulder, even if it can’t be proved or explained that doesn’t mean it is not true. What was brilliant about the show was that sometimes what appeared

supernatural would be exposed as a hoax and other times the close encounters with inexplicable events would be left for the viewer to decide.

This morning's Gospel story is called *The Transfiguration*, and it most certainly will never be debunked by Scully's skeptical science nor proven as truth by Mulder's dogged detective work. So like the millions of *X Files* fans we're left to make our own meaning out of this week's episode.

Let's ask God to help.

*Holy and mysterious God, entrenched in a post-modern world we often struggle with these mystical happenings recorded in Scripture - Moses talking to a burning bush, Elijah ascending in a flaming chariot, the two of them appearing hundreds of years later on a mountain top with a glowing Jesus. Help us this morning to engage the mystery through the lens of Love, and may the words of my mouth and the meditation of all our hearts be pleasing and acceptable to you our rock and our redeemer. AMEN*

I think we have to begin this morning admitting that our Holy Scriptures are riddled with paradox, mystery and contradiction. But I don't think it's a reasonable task or even expectation that we can resolve or restrict the spiritual life to tidy boxes of certainty and logical equation proofs. Furthermore, I think that if we **could** neatly prove away all mystery surrounding God we'd end up with a pretty small God. I'm not saying that a mystical life of faith requires that we abandon all critical thinking. In my experience, critical thought is actually expanded and sharpened when the possibility of awe and wonder are embraced as fervently as verifiable proof.

Here's an example of paradox for you. I ask my confirmation class if we should take the Bible literally. The educated and sophisticated teenagers quickly all agree that we most certainly cannot - and they are absolutely right. But then, as we discuss Moses parting the Red Sea, Noah's Ark, Jonah's whale and other stories, they reject the relevance of Scripture, insisting that these are worthless mythological folktales. They don't like it when I point out that their conclusion is based on a literal interpretation!

The famous quote is "Everything in the Bible is true, and some of it actually happened." So when faced with scriptures like the Transfiguration story we look for the underlying truth as it relates to our experience while recognizing that all thought and discussion of a transcendent God is by definition metaphoric and symbolic. Our words and thoughts will never even come close to capturing the fullness of God. That's why Jesus always used stories that started with, "The kingdom of heaven is like..."

The Transfiguration is a jaw dropping paranormal vision that reveals to the reader the visceral fear that overcomes anyone who comes close to Transcendent Holy. Suddenly you're confronted with a cognitive dissonance that rocks everything you thought you knew. Many of us have had these mountaintop moments.

One of mine was literally on a mountaintop. Years ago I was directing a hiking film on Mount Ben Nevis in northern Scotland. When we reached the rocky summit we all took a break. I went away to a secluded outcropping of rock to gaze at the view. Quite suddenly a dense fog blew in and before I knew it I could barely see my hands. Then, just to my right I saw a silhouetted human figure sitting on the edge of the cliff. Seconds later the fog blew through and the figure had vanished! I actually went over to the spot and looked over the edge thinking one of my crew had fallen off! Later that night, reflecting on that bizarre moment I was struck with the idea that this experience was exactly like my faith. It's the paradox of seeing and not seeing, knowing with certainty yet not really knowing for sure. I think of this experience every time I read the Transfiguration story.

According to Richard Rohr this is what ordinary mysticism is. "Experiential knowledge of spiritual things." Spirituality, faith and all things sacred can only become real when we can trust our inner experience, even when it's inexplicable, even when it's frightening. If we can learn to allow ourselves to sit comfortably in the paradox of knowing and not knowing we will begin to enter into the realm of the ordinary mystic. This is when these Biblical stories begin to really resonate with deep wisdom and truth, whether they ever actually happened or not becomes irrelevant.

On Wednesday we will begin once again to enter into the deep wilderness of lent. We'll begin the journey by accepting ashes as a sign of our frailty and mortality. The following 6 weeks are set apart for followers of Jesus to really focus on our inner experience and relationship with God. It's a time to courageously abandon what you think you already know and cast away all the comfortable certainties you cling to. If you dare, for the next six weeks allow yourself to be uncomfortable in mystery and paradox. Take your place on a spiritual mountaintop in the presence of God. Be still in the cloud of unknowing and as the voice in the cloud said, simply listen. Release for a time the compulsion to resolve the mystery and just delight in the possibility of becoming an ordinary mystic. I know this is a big ask but don't overthink it. It's been said that, "The world is charged with the grandeur of God" if you have eyes to see and ears to hear in the stillness, "You are my beloved - wholly acceptable just as you are."

People of God, the truth is out there! - AMEN