

At the Peak

Matthew 17:1-8

Sermon by Dan Schrock

March 2, 2014

Transfiguration Sunday

Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and his brother John and led them up a high mountain, by themselves. ²And he was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became dazzling white. ³Suddenly there appeared to them Moses and Elijah, talking with him. ⁴Then 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." ⁵While 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!" ⁶When the disciples heard this, they fell to the ground and were overcome by fear. ⁷But Jesus came and touched them, saying, "Get up and do not be afraid." ⁸And when they looked up, they saw no one except Jesus himself alone. (NRSV)

I

This story seems unreal. The face of Jesus switching from a lovely brown tone into something that shines like the sun? Come on, how is that possible? Or his clothes shifting from tan to white? Fabric can't do that. And Moses and Elijah appearing side-by-side with Jesus? Those guys had been dead for hundreds of years. What an outlandish story! We in our technology and science-driven world are skeptical of tales like this. To our rational, well-educated minds such stories do not compute.

Technology has undeniably made our lives easier, allowing us to do things we couldn't do otherwise. But surrounding ourselves with technology might also make it harder for us to experience awe and wonder. Most of us are surrounded by electric lights, furnaces and air conditioners, computers, tablets, phones, printers, game consoles, TVs, cooking gadgets, high-end carpentry tools, cars and trucks and airplanes. We're so immersed in technology that when a problem arises, our first impulse is to think of a technological solution. When we're sick, we trust medical technology to save us. When we need energy to sustain the economy, we expect technology to produce more power from solar, wind, or fossil fuels. Do you need some new heads for your electric toothbrush but don't have the time to run

out to the store? No problem; Amazon.com and UPS have already figured out a technological solution for that. If you order online, the new toothbrush heads will be delivered to your front door tomorrow—and it will only take 3 minutes of your time.

Technology has become the primary way we interact with the world. Do you want to talk with your friend? Then Facebook her or Skype her. Want to listen to music? Then use Bluetooth to patch your phone into your car's stereo system. Want to see the Rocky Mountains? Just go to Google Earth or at least put a nice wallpaper on your computer's desktop. Rather than experience the world directly, in many instances we experience it through technology. Instead of calling upstairs that dinner is ready, we take the cell phone out of our pocket and text our children who are glued to the computers inside their bedrooms. In some respects, technology has become a barrier between us and other people, between us and creation, even perhaps between us and God. We're so captivated by our many technologies that I wonder if it has become harder for us to experience the wondrous presence of God—which is around us all the time, if we would only become aware of it.

II

Consider this. One summer day we were camping in the mountains of southwest Colorado. After Jenny and I erected the tent, I walked alone to the top of the neighboring mountain. I took no technology with me. When I arrived at the summit I looked out at the valley spread into the distance. Across the valley, perhaps 5-10 miles away, a storm was developing with thunder, lightening, and sheets of rain. In awe at the grandeur of the storm, I sat on a rock and watched. God, it seemed, was in the middle of that storm, displaying something of divine majesty and power. I was mesmerized.

III

Peter, James, and John walked up a mountain one day with Jesus. Their hands and pockets were empty. They carried no technology—no cell phones, tablets, iPods, cameras, or binoculars. It was just them and the blue sky, the hot ground, and the cool breeze, without technological diversions. They were fully focused on the present moment.

The story doesn't say how the wondrous things happened. We are given no scientific explanations, because biblical writers were almost never concerned about scientific explanations. Biblical writers were instead endlessly fascinated with the person, the character, the glory, and the actions of God. Here Matthew tells the story succinctly: they walked up the mountain and Jesus underwent a metamorphosis. His face glistened like the sun. His clothes whitened. Moses and Elijah appeared next to him. Then from a luminous cloud above a voice said, "This is my Son, the Beloved. With him I'm well pleased, so listen to him!"

However, the most interesting part of the story might be how Peter, James, and John responded to all this. After the voice speaks, they fell to the ground in fear. You should know that when biblical writers use that word "fear," they don't always mean "afraid." The word fear might mean afraid in some of biblical texts, but often the word simply means "awed" or "overwhelmed." In this story, the disciples might be just that: awed and overwhelmed by these events. They sense the presence of God tingling on the surface of their skin, and they fall to the ground in a quintessential act of worship. Quite rightly, they know the proper response anyone can make to the glorious presence of God is worship.

IV

I think our best doorway into this story is the sense of awe and wonder. Forget for a moment the outlandish parts of the story which offend your scientific, technological brain. Instead ask: When *have* you been awed by something wonderful and grand that seems to convey the presence of God? In what ways has the majesty of God tingled your ears or bugged out your eyes? What life experiences have made you want to worship God?

While you're thinking about that, I'll share a few experiences of my own. Maybe they will help you recall some of your own experiences.

The first one has to do with music. In college a friend and I heard about a concert that the AMBS seminary choir was giving in Elkhart. We decided to go. That Friday night they sang a piece by Ralph Vaughn Williams, the *Mass in G minor*. I had never heard this piece before, and while the seminary choir sang it competently, they certainly weren't professionals and the seminary chapel certainly doesn't have the world's absolute best acoustics. But no matter. To my ears it was heavenly. I thought of nothing else. The hard and uncomfortable chair I sat on disappeared from my consciousness. Every ounce of my attention was mesmerized by that music. It was as if God's own angels were filling the room with notes written in the throne room of heaven. It naturally drew me to worship.

How, or when, has music done this for you?

The next story has to do with food. Four years ago Jenny and Nicholas and I vacationed in Michigan's Upper Peninsula. One evening we bought whitefish that had been recently caught in nearby Lake Superior and then smoked on a grill. After warming it up on the campfire, we bit in. You know how the first taste of something is always the most flavorful? The first sip of coffee in the morning bursts with more flavor than the second and third sips. The taste of the first strawberry is more intense than the taste of the ninth and tenth strawberries. That's how this smoked whitefish was. The first taste transfixed us. We were in

ineffable delight. I felt God smacking me in the mouth with a beauty I did not expect—and for the rest of the meal I lived in utter gratitude to God.

How, or when, has food done this to you?

The psychologist Abraham Maslow called these “peak experiences.” Peak experiences are those moments in life that suddenly bring you feelings of joy and well-being, awe and wonder. Typically they don’t last very long. They can happen in response to deep prayer, great art or music, or exposure to the beauty of creation. They are intense moments when we viscerally experience the glory of God.

What happened to the disciples on top of the mountain was a peak experience. Yet it wasn’t so unreal or outlandish after all, because such experiences also happen to us at various points in our lives. Do you remember when, and where, and with whom they happened to you? Do you remember the awe and wonder? Do you remember how you were drawn into worship?