

ENCOUNTERS OF A FOURTH KIND

Luke 9:28-36; 37-43

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Babcock Presbyterian Church

Sunday, February 10, 2013

Each of the lectionary readings today are about an encounter with the awesome presence of God. The Psalmist is left trembling, Moses' face turned shining bright and transcendent light seeped through every pore of Jesus' body. What are we to make of these fantastic images? We can only imagine what it's like to stand before God feeling puny and overwhelmed by the Great I AM.

One of the best descriptions I ever found of what it must be like to find yourself in the presence of the Divine, outside the Bible, is in Kenneth Grahme's book, *The Wind in the Willows* in the chapter entitled "The Piper at the Gates of Dawn." True, it's a fantasy story for children about characters who happen to be animals, and yes, the divine presence they encounter is a pagan god, even so, I believe Grahme captured the essence of what it must be like when the Sacred is revealed to mortal beings.

One of the animals, named Little Portly has been missing for two days causing Rat and Mole to go looking for Little Portly, and so, they get in a boat and paddle upstream searching until at long last they moored their boat on an island "fringed close with willow and silver birch like a veil hiding what might be behind it."

"This is the place of my dream song..." whispered the Rat as if in a trance. "Here in this Holy Place, surely we will find him!"

"Then suddenly the Mole felt a great Awe fall upon him, an awe that turned his muscles to water, bowed his head and rooted his feet to the ground. It was no panic terror, indeed he felt wonderfully at peace and happy, but it was an awe that smote and held him, and without seeing he knew it could only mean some august Presence was very, very near. With difficulty he turned to look for his friend and saw him at his side cowed, stricken and trembling violently.

Perhaps he would never dare raise his eyes...but the call and summons seemed... dominant and imperious... Trembling he obeyed and raised his humble head, and then in that utter clearness of the imminent dawn...he looked in the very eyes of the Great Friend looking down on them humorously, while (his) bearded mouth broke into a half smile...

"RAT!" the mole found breath to whisper, shaking. Are you afraid?"

"Afraid?" murmured the Rat, his eyes shining with unutterable love. "Afraid of him? O never, never! And yet...O, Mole I am afraid."

Then the two animals, crouching to the earth, bowed their heads and did worship.

Sometimes, books written for children, reveal profound truths more clearly than the greatest philosophers and theologians ever could. Likewise, the stories in the Bible, written thousands of years ago before rationalism and the scientific method dulled our innate sense of the Sacred are especially clear and simple yet profound and truthful. God is mysterious, majestic and eternal, yet if God seems awesome, even terrible and far beyond us, it's for our own good, because we're reminded, contrary to what we think, we're not the center of the universe. Instead we're utterly dependant beings at the mercy of God and his unconditional love.

Believe it or not, this Wednesday is Ash Wednesday, the beginning of Lent, that holy season set apart for intentional, prayerful introspection in preparation for our celebration of Christ's resurrection on Easter morning.

Every year on this Sunday before Ash Wednesday we read the story of the Transfiguration, one of those events in the Gospels that defy explanation. Some would dismiss the Transfiguration story claiming it's at worst a fantasy made up by the disciples or at best a metaphor to illustrate the uniqueness of Jesus.

The rest of us believe it's too fantastic not to be true. After all since God is God, couldn't he not break the laws of nature? What's to keep God from revealing signs and wonders for our own good?

We read this story the Sunday before Ash Wednesday because it's all about God validating Jesus before taking the last leg of his journey to the cross. Jesus already alerted his disciples he was going to sacrifice himself for the sins of the world and now God set aside this moment for his son to receive reaffirmation and strength before setting his face towards Jerusalem.

Luke reports eight days after Jesus told his disciples of his decision to be crucified he took Peter, James and John with him on a mountain to pray. Whether or not Jesus knew what was about to happen is an open question. Even so, Jesus' appearance was suddenly transformed, his clothes became dazzling white. At that moment his mortal body couldn't contain his hidden divinity. It might be said this transformation of his appearance was a foretaste of the glory he'd experience at his resurrection.

What's more Moses and Elijah suddenly appeared in their glory and Luke tells us, "were speaking (to Jesus) of his departure, which he was about to accomplish in Jerusalem."

It would be easy to gloss over that last phrase "his departure from Jerusalem," not knowing the Greek word Luke used for departure is exodus. Just as Moses led the Hebrews from bondage in their exodus or exit from Egypt through the awful and fearsome swirling waters of the Red Sea, Jesus would lead us in a second exodus through his awful and fearsome suffering on the cross.

Curiously, Luke gives no indication of Jesus' initial reaction to his transfiguration. Was he caught off guard and surprised? Like Rat and Mole was he "overcome by an awe that turned his muscles into water, bowed his head and rooted his feet to the ground?" No one can say for sure, but it wouldn't surprise me if it did. Certainly, at that critical moment, being reminded of the glory he gave up before becoming a man would reinvigorate his sense of purpose especially after hearing that voice saying, "This is my beloved son, listen to him."

That last command was certainly directed towards Peter, James and John, but that mountain top experience was primarily for Jesus' sake, just as Moses' mountain top encounter was for Moses' sake.

Saying this doesn't diminish Jesus' divinity but reemphasized his humanity. How many times do we find Jesus praying to his Father for help? Certainly at that moment Jesus needed help as much as Moses, and as much as you and me whenever we face a challenge of crisis. But unlike Moses and Jesus not many of us can say we ever had a similar experience.

Why not? Why doesn't God speak to you and me from a cloud, why are we denied having our bodies momentarily morphing into the new bodies we're promised when we step into eternity?

Nobody knows this side of heaven. But that doesn't mean God never visits us, that we go through life never encountering a moment with the Sacred. It may not be with bells and whistles but somehow, even though it's less obvious, it's no less powerful.

To be sure, God makes his awesome "I AM WHO I AM" presence known the same way he always did, even in Bible times. Usually his unmistakable presence comes under the radar, in very ordinary and even unattractive ways, yet when he comes, like Moses, we too should feel compelled to remove our sandals, because we're treading on holy ground.

So when and how does God reveal himself in unmistakable ways?

First of all, you need to be open but not necessarily expecting it to happen. Certainly Jesus makes this clear in his parable of the Final Judgment when those on his right were surprised to learn those they fed, clothed and welcomed was really Christ himself.

You can also encounter the glory of God when the sun sets and rises, at the birth of a baby or at the bedside of a dying loved one. Music that lifts the soul, silently praying over the scriptures, be it outside in nature or inside a sanctuary or in your own house, also brings you into the mystery of God. When your conscience is pricked and moves you to stand with someone being oppressed and isolated from society is another way to tread on holy ground.

Sometimes I hear myself saying “it would be much easier to do the right thing if Jesus was still here in the flesh, walking and talking with me, giving just the right doses of validation and unconditional love, then I’d have the faith that moves mountains.”

That’s not necessarily so. Look at Peter, James and John. The transfiguration had no immediate impact on them. As soon as they climbed down from the mountain they went back to their old ways, jockeying for position, bickering over who was the greatest in God’s Kingdom, even emotionally distancing themselves from Jesus the closer they got to Jerusalem and at the moment Jesus needed them most, running away. All the more reason to thank God for his sufficient grace especially when we fail him.

Lent is about to begin. Forty days to pray, mediate, love and serve as we are invited to enter the mystery of Christ’s passion and death. This year as never before make this time count, for your sake and for the people around you, who need to sense the mystery and sacredness of God living and working in and through you. Do this and you enter into the mystery of God.