

**"THE MYSTICAL IS REALITY"**

**Luke 9:28-36**

**Sermon preached by Dr. Cahill**

**Babcock Presbyterian Church**

**Sunday, March 2, 2014**

At the birth of his first son, a King commanded his royal gardener to develop the most beautiful flower ever grown that would one day be presented to the woman the young prince would choose to be his bride.

Energized by the challenge, the gardener decided he'd focus on the most regal of all flowers, the rose. Over the years he experimented by blending the various varieties until finally the gardener was satisfied he finally produced the most perfect rose just in time for the announcement of the prince's engagement.

On the day of the wedding, the newlyweds entered the palace garden. They made their way to the regal bloom the gardener had cultivated over the years. The royal bride reached down and picked the blossom, but the one she picked wasn't the gardener's magnificent bloom, but instead, a common ordinary flower. The old gardener was crushed, until he realized the princess was blind. She passed over his visually stunning creation because of the rose's one and only flaw. It had no scent. Because she was blind, as far as she was concerned, a rose without a scent was no rose at all.

I believe it can be said if the Christian faith presented to us is devoid of the mystical and the miraculous, then it is no faith at all.

Because of the twentieth century's rationalist, scientific worldview many of us have neglected the reality of the mystical. Many of the denominations, especially the mainliners, have done a great job working for civil rights, taking stands on moral and social issues, but have failed considerably in addressing the spiritual realities of our Christian faith.

People come to church burdened with the perplexities of 21<sup>st</sup> century living that bring about stress and spiritual hunger. And yet, too often, worshippers have been bombarded with their preacher's personal and political agendas without being given a glimpse into the eternal realities.

If the Church works hard for a brave new world, but forgets to preach about the mystery of God active in the world through Christ, then the Church has failed. Even if the Church feeds the hungry and clothes the naked, but neglects to feed and cloth people with the complete Gospel of Christ, the Church has not done its job.

More recently this oversight has been finally addressed and corrected. Trends are being reversed and once again, we're reclaiming the Gospel that continues to recognize issues of social justice, but at the same time points to the wonder and mystery of life. No longer are theologians

bent on demythologizing or trying to explain away with logical explanations those stories in the scriptures that don't jive with reason and scientific method. The Church is finally coming home, allowing the power of the old, old story to speak boldly and bring us into the very presence of God.

The story of the Transfiguration is a case in point. Not too long ago it was fashionable in some circles to explain Jesus transfiguration away as a metaphor, or a literary device to foreshadow Christ's resurrection that was to come, and then be vague as to whether or not this event actually happened.

But in this new climate there's a readiness to accept the unexplainable and instead of insisting we need to solve the mystery, now we can be more comfortable and willing to let the mystery solve us.

According to Luke, eight days earlier Peter came to the realization that Jesus is the Messiah. **"Who do the people say that I am?"** Jesus asked the disciples. **"Some say you are Elijah, some say you are John the Baptist, others believe you are one of the ancient prophets."** **"But,"** Jesus probed, **"Who do you say that I am?"** Peter, inspired by the Spirit blurted out **"You are the Christ."** Thereupon, Jesus foretold his suffering and death, to the disciples chagrin, because they didn't want to hear it.

One week and one day later, after the implications of this revelation had time to sink in, Jesus took three of the disciples one step further into the mystery of his identity. Most times when Jesus went into a time of contemplative prayer he chose to go off by himself. But this time he took Peter, James and John, probably because he didn't want to be alone, as he was struggling with his rendezvous with the cross. At the same time Jesus decided now was the time to lead his three friends a little further down the path. Remember, they were still learning about Jesus and had a lot more to learn. Jesus was understandably distressed when they showed no support or sympathy when he told them he'd be crucified. He was also let down when they didn't accept their call to pick up the cross. Apparently they wanted all the glory but none of the pain. So now was the time for Jesus to try once again to demonstrate what it really means being the Christ so they'd understand what it really means to be a disciple.

It was up on that mountain that something happened that defies rational explanation. While in deep prayer, as Thomas Keating in his book **Reawakening** put it, **"the inner light that was normally hidden emerged and grew so bright that it saturated his clothes and produced an extraordinary radiance. The divine person of the Word is the source of this light. Jesus miraculously hid this light during his earthly lifetime. We must see the Transfiguration as Jesus normal state of being. Like Moses who had to veil his face after he came down from Mr. Sinai because his face became so radiant that none of the Israelites dared to look at him. Jesus had to veil the presence of his divine person within his humanity. Now the disciples were finally ready. Jesus was able to be himself."**

Remember what I said earlier, "**A Christian faith devoid of the mystical is no faith at all.**" This mountain top experience was a bridge between heaven and earth. It's one of those times we're reminded our connection to Christ is what brings the Divine in contact with our humanity. In other words, Jesus divinity enables us to be human.

Certainly having an intimate experience with Jesus reaffirms our humanity and enables a deeper appreciation of what it means to be utterly dependent on God. We all crave these experiences and yet, they seem so few and far between. Especially when life gets out of control, who wouldn't want to take a time out, stand on a mountain top and be enveloped by beauty and truth?

Unfortunately, sometimes we try to manufacture these experiences on our own. Francis Caponi, a Roman Catholic Priest, noted this phenomena. He writes, "**Both Jesus Christ and Elvis Presley are discerned in refrigerator rust stains and strangely shaped vegetables.**" But despite all our attempts to manufacture mystical experiences, the truth is when all is said and done we can't force them to happen but if we're patient and wait, they'll happen when God is ready.

But don't think these mystical experiences are all stupendous power and light shows. Most of the time these moments emerge from the ordinary.

Mary Reuter in her article "**A Second Look at Mysticism in Everyday Life**" writes, "**I was walking through the woods shuffling through dead leaves. Suddenly ahead of me was a single violet, regal, rich in color, standing elegantly in a two inch square of clear space in the midst of brittle maple and oak leaves. In an instant, I knew something of the experience of death and resurrection. Both were a reality at my feet. This event happened ten years ago. I recall it often and each time that I dwell with it a few minutes I know again.**"

So, the mystical isn't just found in the spectacular. A beautiful sunset, a gently falling spring rain, the birth of a baby, an intimate conversation with a soul friend, are all occasions, for, as Handel put it after he wrote the last note for his masterpiece, "The Messiah," "**when all of heaven opened before me and the great God himself.**"

These experiences are given to take us outside of our selves and into a new way of living and serving as we grow in our humanity and live as both a child of God and disciple of Christ. Otherwise, these experiences can become perverted and narcissistic, spiritual highs to intoxicate us instead of grooming us. You see, mystical experiences aren't given just to make us feel good but to help us become good and even more like Christ.

Something else to consider: it just wasn't what Peter, James and John saw that was important, but also what they heard. When Jesus was conferring with Elijah and Moses, they were speaking of Jesus "**departure**" which he was to accomplish in Jerusalem. Of course this is referring to his crucifixion, his death on the cross for the sins of the world.

Interesting point, the original Greek word Luke used for departure is Exodus means "**the way out.**" Through his death, Jesus would lead us the way out from under the power of sin and death and into the Kingdom, even as Moses led the people out from bondage in Egypt and into the Promised Land. So through the Transfiguration, the three disciples were taught an important lesson: a mystical experience is given first and foremost to bring us to glory through the cross. If it doesn't move us to glory through the cross, and if our own personal lexicon of the Christian faith doesn't include words like sacrifice, service, trust and hope, then, like a rose without a scent your faith isn't Christian.

One more thing. Mystical experiences aren't supposed to last forever. Like Peter we may want to prolong these happenings and stay up on the mountain indefinitely, but the time comes when it's time to go back down into the real world.

When our worship together is done after the benediction is pronounced, you will leave this sanctuary and return to your valleys. You'll leave here the same people you were when you came in. The same problems you left at home will greet you when you go back.

But there is this saving difference. This morning, you have been with Jesus and in some way, not yet fully revealed to you, his mystical presence has touched your humanity as that process of transformation, being slowly changed into the image of Christ by the grace of God continues in your life, if you want it to.

Of course, you may not be just where God wants you to be in your Christian walk, certainly Peter, James and John still had a long way to go, but like them, you and I are on the way of becoming closer to Jesus, who brings us closer to the very heart of God.

So, cultivate your life in Christ with the hope of blooming like the most regal of flowers and be open to his mystical presence that ushers you into God's mysterious presence for his pleasure and your salvation.

Let us pray!