

## **Wondrous Sight**

**Scriptures: Exodus 24: 12-18**  
**Matthew 17: 1-9**

Aren't you glad it's almost March? At least it means February is over and done, and this year it certainly seems like spring is on its way early. Yes, we may have some more snow and cold to deal with, but at least we're that much closer to winter's demise and the advent of spring. Our wintry world is being quickly thawed out by the season that's coming to us from the not so distant future. For us here in Massachusetts, each day of sunshine and warmer temperatures we've had this week comes like a promise, a preview of the warm days that will eventually be with us all the time.

At one level, a glimpse of such future promise couldn't be better timed this year. To go on-line or read the paper or listen to the TV news day after day this winter has had most of us down in the dumps. All the tweets and instant news feeds on our I-Phones about Trump this and Trump that just polarizes and politicizes our country even further than it has been. Where has there been any good news of late? What's ever happened to our sense of national purpose and unity? We seem to be at each other's throats, with no let up in sight.

One late winter day some years back an unexpected snowstorm in the Middle East brought a foot of snow to Jerusalem blanketing the surrounding countryside of Israel and Palestine in a mantle of white. In places like Bethlehem and Ramallah on the West Bank, Palestinians and Israelis came out from behind their shuttered windows and rifle sites and played in the snow, trading bullets and denunciations for snowballs and shouts of glee. It hadn't snowed like this there in fifty years... a sudden and unexpected switch, catching everybody off guard and interrupting their everyday routine of political tension and armed hostility. For us snow is what we're trying to get rid of, but for them, living in those dry,

sunbaked lands of the Middle East, it came as a welcome surprise. At least for a day or two their tensions and hatreds were supplanted by a sense of wonder and awe, followed by an outpouring of joy. It didn't matter if you were an Israeli or a Palestinian. You were all momentarily children of God together, frolicking in the snow!

The in-breaking of God's miraculous presence is what it's all about. Every now and then, just when all seems most mundane or most stuck or most hopeless in our lives, suddenly we encounter a glimpse of another reality, a marvelous, glorious, inexplicable phenomenon, which can leave us standing in awe, realizing there's a lot more to the picture than what we'd been in touch with or what we'd expected.

Presbyterian author Frederick Buechner, in his book Whistling in the Dark, describes the experience of awe that comes in witnessing God's majesty in nature when he writes:

*"I remember seeing a forest of giant redwoods for the first time. There were some small children nearby, giggling and chattering and pushing each other around. Nobody had to tell them to quiet down as we entered. They quieted down all by themselves. Everybody did. You couldn't hear a sound of any kind. It was like coming into a vast, empty room... There was a stillness and stateliness about (the redwoods) that seemed to become part of you as you stood there stunned by the sight of them. They had been growing in that place for going on two thousand years. With infinite care they were growing even now. You could feel them doing it. They made you realize that all your life you had been mistaken. Oaks and ashes, maples and chestnuts and elms you had seen for as long as you could remember, but never until this moment had you so much as dreamed what a Tree really was."*<sup>1</sup>

Peter, James and John had been living with Jesus for sometime before going up the mountain with him that day. But they must

have stood there in awe as suddenly and quite unexpectedly they saw him as he truly was, in all his glory, the man they'd known to that point only as their rabbi and teacher. Their experience and understanding of reality was transfixed and transformed as Christ was transfigured before them on the mountaintop.

Of course such visions of divine glory don't happen everyday for us, just as snowstorms don't happen except once in a blue moon in the Middle East and giant redwoods don't grow in our parks, unless we live in California. But when we encounter some such wondrous sight, we get a foretaste, perhaps, of a greater reality enfolding our lives from beyond time, coming to us from what Paul Tillich described as *"that which is beyond old and beyond new, the Eternal."*<sup>2</sup> It's this glimpse of eternity that makes us occasionally stop and stand in awe, and of which Hebrew scholar Abraham Heschel writes: *"Our goal should be to live life in radical amazement. Get up in the mornings and look at the world in a way that takes nothing for granted. Everything is phenomenal. To be spiritual is to be amazed."*<sup>3</sup>

Things like the giving of the law to Moses on stone tablets on the cloud-shrouded top of Mt. Sinai or the Transfiguration of Christ on the mountaintop in our New Testament lesson don't happen just everyday. In fact most of us might doubt they ever happen at all. We haven't experienced anything like them, and we don't expect we ever will. For the most part we base our belief on what we know, and on what others know and have told us. If it happened in history and is documented by reliable sources, then we believe it. Or if it happened to us and we went through it personally we can't deny it, and we then accept it as being real.

Our ability to make sense out of life is grounded on having certain categories into which we place our experiences and make sense out of them. We relate them to other experiences in those categories familiar to us. Each time we drop a ball, for instance, we expect

that it's going to go down, not up, because we have experienced the force of gravity at work every other time we've done this before. We associate dropping things with gravity because it's a given force in the world we inhabit. As far as we know it's been there since the beginning of the world, and it doesn't look like that's going to change anytime soon. So we base our belief system on this assumption, because it's a safe bet, because it's happened this way every time we've tried it.

But what if reality were ordered not just by what has happened already, but by what has not yet happened? What if our sense of meaning were to be based not just on the historical record or on our own personal collection of experiences, but also on things that were going to happen, but had not happened yet? Rather than just using the past for a compass, what about using the future as another point of reference?

How would our worldview change, if suddenly we were given a wondrous sight of what was coming? Would we go back to our day-to-day routine with the same approach and beliefs we'd always had before? Chances are we wouldn't. Chances are we'd have a new framework in which to place the experiences of our lives, and we'd begin to make sense out of them in different ways than we ever had before.

What would you say if I were to suggest that our two lessons for today are not based on historically empirical fact? Would it make the giving of the Ten Commandments or the Transfiguration any less meaningful to assert that these are stories based not on verifiable, documented history, but rather on visionary experience? And with the Transfiguration, what would you say if rather than being attested to as historical record it was really a glimpse of the future, of a reality that has not happened yet, but like the springtime thaw nevertheless is coming?

Maybe you feel like I'm playing with your minds here. But bear with me just a little bit. This all has to do with our concept of time and order. We live with a commonly held concept of linear time. One event happens, then the next and the next, and so on and so on. One event builds on the one immediately preceding it, and progresses in a straight line, from the left to the right, across the pages of history. But try to conceive of it from a different perspective. What if the action happened both from left to right and from right to left, from past toward the future and from the future toward the past? It would mean that the future set direction and gave meaning just as much as the past.

Philosophers and theologians have pondered this concept for centuries. The German theologian, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, writing from his cell in a Nazi prison during World War II, expounded on the concept of the future's place in understanding the present and giving Christians a sense of hope empowering us to make it through the trials of the present time. He and others use terms like "ultimate" and "penultimate" to describe the position of events and their significance in time. An ultimate event is that which comes last. A penultimate event is that which comes next to last. The penultimate event is given its position and meaning based on its relation to the ultimate event, which follows it, not on what precedes it. Therefore, with this understanding, we can see life through new lenses, looking toward that which is not yet to give meaning to that which is. For Christians, this is a key to understanding the place and role of resurrection in our faith system. The ultimate truth is the eternal life promised by Christ, and everything else we experience is penultimate to it.

When the weird and indescribable experience of the transfiguration happened to Peter and James and John, they had no reference point by which to make sense out of it. Peter knew it was something special, something unique and indescribable and wonderful. After his initial experience of "shock and awe" at this strange, visionary

experience, he grasped about for a way to respond, casting back on what he knew and was familiar with. Being a man of action, Peter wanted to do something. He wanted to make something with which to memorialize the experience. He couldn't have been more off the mark if he'd tried, for there was nothing in the transfiguration experience which could be contained or comprehended or passed on to others, at least not yet.

Jesus then comforts the three disciples reassuring them by his touch as he leads them along, back down off the mountain, saying to them that they must not tell anyone about what they've seen until later, until he'd been raised from the dead. For without this future event to serve as a reference point, the experience of the transfiguration would be incomprehensible. It's meaning was not to be found in the past or even in the present for the disciples. It was a foretaste of glory to come, a wondrous sight of what God has in store.

So why give the disciples this glimpse of glory if they couldn't understand it? And why give any of us a foretaste of a coming reality, if we don't have anything by which we can make sense out of it?

Why? Because God's like that, that's why! God's the one who has control over time, not us. God is not just coming to us from the past or in the present, but from the future as well. It may just be that God has fashioned this whole universe on principles we've only just begun to get a glimpse of so far. Maybe we've been given just enough understanding to cope for now. But wait till we see what's coming! This whole time concept may not be linear at all, but multidimensional, like a hologram or like the many facets of a diamond. Past, present and future may all be related and connected to each other in ways we don't yet fully see, but only have been given a foretaste of, here and there, now and then. Moses on Mt. Sinai, the Transfiguration story, the wondrous events

surrounding the Resurrection of Christ... these may actually be foretastes of what is yet to come, not based just on what has been up till now. To see them in this light may put them in an entirely different perspective for us. And to try to understand them out of their wider context is to misunderstand them and to miss their true meaning as badly as Peter was obviously missing the point as he babbled on up on the mountaintop there that day.

Peter wanted to capture and freeze the power of the transfiguration by building some sort of memorial structure on the mountaintop. If he could just hang on to the magic of the moment, then maybe he could make sense out of it and making sense out of it, appropriate its power for his life. Yet Jesus directs him (and us) away from this course of action. He charges the three disciples not to memorialize their experience of glory, in fact, not to tell anyone about it at all, until a later time, when what would happen in the future, his death and resurrection, would begin to make sense out of what they had just experienced.

Jesus asserts that there is a place for mystery in human life, that there is an issue to the timing of revelation, that everything will not make sense until we've lived our way from the past into the future and until we've seen what's coming from the future, God's future, into our present and past. Our human response to this mysterious reality is to stand in awe as we seek ways to comprehend and to act. Comprehension may not come fully yet. But action can proceed, and Christ encourages us to do just that.

By having a glimpse of what is to come, we can go back down into the valleys of our everyday lives, the chilly days of February and March, and live in this troubled world into which we are called with a new perspective, a new outlook and new energy, even if we don't yet fully understand what it is that's going.

*"Transfiguration is living by vision,"* writes Biblical scholar Walter

Wink. (It means) "*standing foursquare in the midst of a broken, tortured, oppressed, starving, dehumanizing reality, yet seeing the invisible, calling to it to come, behaving as if it is on the way, sustained by elements of it that have come already, within and among us.*" <sup>4</sup>

Yes, transfiguration means being stunned by the magic of an unexpected snowfall or the grace of a late winter day's spring-like warmth. At first we stand in awe, silent and transfixed, or giddy, and babbling for joy. But then it's up to us to move on, letting our glimpse of that greater reality transform our here and now, and how we live together in it as Christ's faithful disciples, each and every day.

Thanks be to God!

Amen.

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1. Frederick Buechner, Whistling in the Dark An ABC Theologized, San Francisco, Harper & Row Publishers, 1988, p. 16-17  
2. Paul Tillich, The Shaking of the Foundations, New York, Charles Scribner & Sons, c. 1948, p. 181  
3. Abraham Heschel, Preaching This Week, on Textweek.com; "Sermon Brainwave" podcast of March 2, 2014.  
4. Walter Wink, from the theological journal Interpretation.