

Church of the Crossroads
Last Sunday after Epiphany / Transfiguration
February 3, 2008
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THE RELIGIOUS IMPULSE

Exodus 24:12–18
Psalm 99
Matthew 17:1–9

It looks as if this will be a three-point sermon. That is a little unusual for me. Usually, I prefer to be free from the kind of restraint suggested by three points. On the other hand, a three-point sermon may be preferable to a twenty-point sermon or one containing just a half-point!

First, though, a word or two about that Story of the Transfiguration we heard this morning. It has all the earmarks of a resurrection story, but Matthew chooses to place it just midway through his Gospel. Here it is, as it is in Mark and Matthew, placed *before* the journey of Jesus to Jerusalem and the cross. Perhaps, the three Gospel writers want to give us a hint as to the final outcome of the story before we are invited to journey with Jesus along the road to the cross. It's hard to say. It may also be that the Gospel writers want to make a statement about how the disciples misunderstand what is going on. After all, the truth about Jesus is not, in the first place, to be discovered in this moment of glory on the mountain top. The truth about Jesus, rather, is to be found more particularly in his journey to the cross. From an all-too-human point of view, it might be preferable to have all this glory without a cross. But, then, it would not be the story of Jesus. However much we might want to avoid the cross, Jesus cannot really be known apart from it.

Each time I hear the story of the transfiguration, I am drawn to one detail or another. Surely, the presence of Moses and Elijah along with Jesus is fascinating. The Gospel writers want us to consider Jesus as the fulfillment of both the law represented by Moses and the prophets represented by Elijah. Then, there is the presence of the cloud, which links this story to the one we heard from the Book of Exodus about the cloud that covered the glory of the Lord on Mount Sinai, and into which Moses enters in order to receive the Ten Commandments.

Again, in the Story of the Transfiguration we could also be drawn to the voice of God, which comes from the cloud, saying, “This is my Son, the Beloved; with whom I am well pleased; listen to him!” We cannot help but recall that this voice and these words are the same voice and words we heard at the baptism of Jesus, with three words added, “Listen to him.”

This time, though, I was drawn to that sentence that occurs in the middle of the story.

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.”
—Mt 17:4

In a way, this suggestion made by Peter, comes out of left field. There is nothing leading up to it by way of introduction. Nor is there any response to it. Somehow, though, it must be important. I think that Peter’s suggestion goes back to the idea that as human beings we want the glory without the cross, that it would be far more preferable to capture the moment of glory and remain on the mountain rather than to go down from the mountain in order to begin the journey to Jerusalem. By constructing three dwellings, Peter will not have to come to terms with the truth that “Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to rest his head.” (Lk 9:58)

I have also been drawn to Peter’s suggestion because of the wonderful conversation we had with Douglas John Hall this past Sunday. Douglas spoke about the human need to be religious in order to be in touch with the divine. He also spoke about the limits of religion, and also its dangers, and how God always remains beyond religious knowledge and understanding. He quoted Augustine who said “*Si comprehendis, non est Deus*”—“If you comprehend, it is not of God.”

And now for those three points I promised you at the beginning of this sermon. First, we can say that Peter’s suggestion that he build three dwellings there on the mountaintop—one for Moses, one for Elijah, and one for Jesus—reveals the human religious impulse to house, to preserve, to reduce to human understanding that which is of God, and most especially, God’s mystery and glory. If Peter can just build those three dwellings, on a permanent basis he will have access to God’s glory revealed in the

transfiguration. He will be able to preserve and possess God's glory for himself and his companions. He will not have to journey to the cross.

Who can blame him? Who can blame us for wanting to enshrine that which is holy and divine? Who can blame human beings for creating magnificent cathedrals with exquisite stained glass windows and vaulted ceilings that reach to the sky, all of which allow us to experience the glory and mystery of God? For we live in an unsettling world, and we are all to subject to the chance and change that is life. Who can blame us for wanting a measure of spiritual security even if we can not have security in our world? We must not be too quick to judge Peter, for in so many respects we ourselves are Peter. It is humanly impossible to go through life without a home base, spiritually speaking. And so we devise our theological formulations and our creeds. We create our church communities where we can be loved and where we can love in our turn, and to which we can turn when the going gets tough. Yes, this religious impulse to house, to preserve, to reduce to human understanding that which is of God is a natural human tendency, and we should not be too judgmental on those who seek religious security, for in many ways we seek the same.

In the second place, however, there is great danger in this religious impulse, this attempt to enshrine and capture God's glory, and reduce it to human understanding. "Religion kills!" as the graffiti on the wall in front of the Presbyterian College read just after 9/11. The religious impulse can easily turn to religious certainty, and if we begin to believe that we have captured the glory of God, that we indeed possess God, that we alone have the truth, then it can easily follow that no else is legitimate, religiously speaking. Religious warfare can result. True Islamic believers will be willing to die for their religion by flying airplanes into the World Trade Center, and Franklin Graham, Billy Graham's son, can, with all certainty, claim that Muslims will be damned to hell because they refuse to accept the Lordship of Jesus Christ.

Richard Rodriguez, in a provocative article, *The God of the Desert*, which appeared in the January issue of Harper's Magazine, visits the desert, the birth place of Jewish, Muslim, and Christian monotheism, and traces how religious certainty can turn into violence. He writes,

The Semitic God is God who enters history. Humans examine every event that pertains to us for meaning. The motive of God

who has penetrated time tempts us to imperfect conjecture. When armies are victorious, when armies are trodden in the dust, when crops fail, when volcanoes erupt, when seas drink multitudes, it must mean God intends it so. What did we do to deserve this? King David psalmed for the vanishing of his enemies, did he not? There is something in the leveling jealousy of the desert God that summons a possessive response in us. *We are His People* becomes *He is our God*. The blasphemy that attaches to monotheism is the blasphemy of certainty. If God is on our side, we must be right. We are right because we believe in God. We must defend God against the godless. Certitude clears a way for violence. And so the monk's dictum—the desert creates warriors—can represent centuries of holy war and sordid prayer and an umbilicus that whips like a whirlwind.

In truth, there is great danger in the religious impulse to house, preserve, and reduce to human understanding that which is of God.

Third, in light of all that has been said, in light of God's mystery and glory, we would do best to fall silent in the presence of God, willing always to let go of all of our religious constructions, whether it be our theology, our human understanding, and even our religious institutions as we lay our lives before the God who mysteriously creates and redeems. Our human tendency, surely, is to bring God down to our size, and then to substitute faith in the God who is both mysteriously beyond ourselves and yet mysteriously present in all of life for our religious understandings and institutional commitments.

On the other hand, we must never think for a moment that we can simply set aside the religious impulse to house, preserve, and the desire to understand that which is of God. I can barely imagine my life apart from my commitment to Church of the Crossroads and also my desire to seek faith's understanding. Those who would set aside our human need to understand, as limited as our understanding will always be, end up denying the gift God has bestowed upon human beings, and that is the capacity to think. And as for those who would simply discard the church, whether it be disillusioned laity or clergy, it would do well for them to hear these words written by Karl Barth:

Take good note, that a parson who does not believe that in this congregation of his [or hers], including those men and women, old wives and children, Christ's congregation exists, does not believe at all in the existence of the Church. *Credo ecclesiam* [I believe in the church] means that I believe that here, at this place, in this visible assembly, the work of the Holy takes place. By that is not intended a deification of the creature, the Church is not the object of faith, we do not believe *in* the Church; but we do believe that in this congregation the work of the Holy spirit becomes an event. The mystery of The Church is that for the Holy Spirit it is not too small a thing to have such forms.¹

We must surely, then, hold fast to this community that we love, and yet be willing to let it go also, for the church can never be a substitute for the God whose glory fills the skies. God does not need the church, but the church, in all humility and modesty, surely needs the presence of God as it seeks to be faithful. Holding fast and letting go—a most difficult task, but one which faith demands.

Yes, the religious impulse to house, preserve, and the desire to understand that which is of God is a human impulse that we cannot and should not deny. We must always acknowledge, though, that this religious impulse is subject to distortion. And so we must always be willing to let go of our religious constructions and fall silent in the presence of God.

And, after all has been said, there is the voice, “This is my Son, the Beloved, listen to him.” He speaks, and in the midst of all our religious institutions and constructions, he says, “Follow me. Leave behind your religious impulses. Come down from the mountain, and with me make your way to Jerusalem and a cross.” And so it is that we will listen to him. We will trust always that the God whose glory fills the skies is with us and for us through him, whether he or we be on the mountain, or on the road to the cross. It is he who calls us to faithful discipleship, to be the faithful people we have been called to be. Thanks be to God.

¹ *Dogmatics in Outline*, trans. G.T. Thomson (New York: Harper & Row, 1959), 143.