

Just a Glimpse

Luke 9:28-36

I recently learned that many cultures contain some legend about how it is that a soul gets into our human bodies. In Japanese culture, babies are thought to come into this world from very far away. A baby's soul finds this world very strange, the legend goes. The child's mother or caregiver must keep the baby very close, never leave the baby alone, so that the soul will not be afraid, so that it will know that is welcome to stay inside this body. The Norwegian legend is that before a soul is put into a body, God kisses it. All during its life on earth, the soul remembers that kiss; and everything that happens in this life connects in some way to that memory. And the Jewish version of the legend is that just before God puts a soul into the body of a new life on earth, the soul must forget about its life in heaven, the life it has already shared with God. An angel presses the baby's mouth shut—a gesture that reminds this tiny being that during her whole life on earth, she must be silent about what she has seen of the Holy. That little crevice that each of us has underneath our nose is the imprint of the angel's finger, sealing your lips. That's why, they say, when you are trying to remember something, sometimes without even thinking, you will put your own finger in that space.¹

When we are speaking of holy things, we do have a hard time putting our experience into words. It's as though we are trying to remember, or find, the words for something that we have barely touched, something just out of our reach. Maybe you know the experience of trying to tell someone what you believe, or about a spiritual connection that you once sensed, and finding yourself clumsy, inarticulate, unable to say what you felt, what you are sure you know...or at least knew for a moment. I certainly have felt that...many times. Maybe all the time.

Take heart. The Bible is full of stories that echo our experience of how hard it is to talk about God, how elusive a vision of God is. Even the most spiritual people only get a brief glimpse before that light retreats again. It's hard to hold onto. We are left wanting more, wondering if what we saw was real.

In fact, you might say that elusiveness, mystery, even distance, is a theme that runs all the way through our stories of God. Even Moses, who talked with God regularly, got only an angled view of him. I want to see you in your full glory, Moses told God once. Show me. Nope, God said: Stand over there, behind a rock, and as I pass by, you'll be able to see my back. But not my face. It would be too much. We are too different.

The people Moses led could absorb even less. Every time Moses came down from the mountain where he talked with God, he drew a veil over his face—knowing that his encounter with God had put a light in his face and his eyes that would blind them. Nobody wants God's light shining *that* brightly on their lives.

¹ From Ronald Rolheiser, *The Holy Longing*, p. 15-16.

In every space where the Israelites worshiped God— first in the tent that they carried with them across the desert in the Exodus, then in the Temple that Solomon built in Jerusalem—there was a curtain, a veil, that separated the sanctuary, where the people stood, from the area where the priest went to encounter God directly on their behalf. Always, their experience of God was indirect—as though it was *supposed* to be hard for them to know exactly what God looked or smelled or sounded like.

Today we read the story known as the Transfiguration of Jesus, which comes right in the middle of the Gospels. Jesus took three of his disciples one day and they walked up the mountain. Peter, James, John—the inside team, Jesus’ best friends, the ones he really wanted to understand him. All of a sudden, they saw a great light around Jesus. There seemed to be two other figures standing with him: Moses and Elijah, the greatest prophets in Jewish history. The three were talking, as if they knew each other.

For just a moment those disciples felt like they got it: clarity, the kind of certainty they hadn’t felt often, about who Jesus was, what category of greatness he belonged in. And then a cloud came down, obscuring the light, cutting off their vision. Peter reacted the way most of us probably would have. “Oh my gosh—that was amazing!” he said. “Let’s build something here!” Let’s mark this spot, put something right here that will help us re-create this moment. If we got that holy feeling here, like this, maybe it will happen again.

“No,” the voice in the cloud said. Maybe that voice sounded loud mostly inside of them, where already the vision had started to fade a little bit out of focus.

And when they came down off that mountain, they never told anyone. They never did try to explain to their friends what they saw up there. They couldn’t have done it. That doesn’t mean they forgot, or that it didn’t change them in some way. But it was a moment, just a glimpse, impossible to recapture in quite the same way they’d experienced it.

Almost by definition an experience of the Holy is hard to hold onto. It visits you for just a moment, a flash of peace or well-being or purpose; and then it’s gone again. You can’t make it come back at will; if you could, it wouldn’t be God. It would be a statue, an idol. And so, we carry those glimpses around like half-forgotten memories. We depend on them to keep us inspired and connected. We long for more of them.

At the foundation of the Christian form of faith is a belief that we have been given more. That God has revealed himself—actually given us a long look at his face—in the single life of a person who lived more than 2,000 years ago. That in this person Jesus, God disclosed more fully than ever before or since who God is, what God was hoping for in his people, in creation.

In fact, this is what distinguishes Christianity from every other religion in the world, this *incarnation*, the willingness of God to be one of us, with us, unveiled.

What does it mean to be a person of spirit? What would a life filled with God's love look like? Jesus—his words, the stories about how he lived—gives some concreteness to what can otherwise seem pretty vague and feathery. You love the person in front of you, Jesus says—the person who is here in this place, tugging on your sleeve or your conscience now. You feed the one who is hungry. You bring in the one who has been left out. You forgive the one who has hurt you. You come to this table and chew and swallow a meal like the one we shared together this morning; and then you go out to be the presence of God to someone else. This is how you see God. This way of living *is* God. God lives in every one of these moments.

And here's the magical thing. In the moments we live the way Jesus told us to, we not only see God; we are seen. We too are unveiled. We are disclosed—lifted out of our isolation—in a way that deep inside, in some way maybe we have not even named, all of us long for. Meeting God is not just an occasional burst of ecstasy; it's a relationship in which you are seen and known and stayed with. A relationship of intimacy. Intimacy much more profound than just physical. Intimacy which, when you break it into its syllables, can be thought of as, “into-me-see”.

Over the next six weeks, the season of Lent, we're going to be exploring what intimacy—*into-me-see*—looks like. The season begins this coming Wednesday evening, Ash Wednesday, when we'll repeat the ancient ritual that has always marked the beginning of Lent, wiping ashes on our foreheads as a reminder that we are deeply and essentially connected to the earth, part of the cycle of life and death that all living things share. On Sundays we'll look more closely at some of the people who opened themselves up to Jesus. We'll think about the questions Jesus asked them, what those questions called for from them, what they might ask of us. And on the following Wednesday evenings, we'll gather for simple dinners together, and practice some things that you might think of as life-skills: tools for building authentic, open relationships with other people.

Inside your bulletin this morning you'll find some other practices we're suggesting for the season: a Sunday afternoon Bible Study, a book recommendation, a Lenten fast.

Lent is an invitation to engage more deeply in your own spiritual life between now and Easter, which comes at the end of March. The season of Lent is forty days—roughly a tenth of the year. Think of it as a tithe of your time, one-tenth of your days this year, to give to practicing life in a more intimate relationship with God and with other people.

Transfiguration Sunday is always celebrated in the church on the Sunday before Lent begins. Maybe this story of Jesus' and his disciples' hike up the mountain, when the light of God shone with so much brightness that they were stunned, is there to remind us of the occasional glimpses we've had of God's face. The love and peace—the clarity—that we get for just a moment before it slips through our fingers again. How much we long to live in that embrace: closely held, completely seen, deeply understood.