

Kibitzing on the Transfiguration

Transfiguration Sunday, February 23, 2020

Matthew 17:1-9

© Rev. John Weicher

Torrell Armstrong – Elijah

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I can think of no one better than Moses and Elijah to kibitz on the Transfiguration. Both are on a first-name basis with God. Both witnessed God's glory for themselves in mountain-top experiences, and then lived to tell the tale. Both have just a touch of that indescribable quality that Jesus seems to have in spades. Their presence on that mountain with Jesus and Peter, James and John, and God's own self only seems to add to the majesty and wonder of the occasion. Elijah and Moses burst upon the scene suddenly – which is fitting, for everything in Matthew's Gospel happens suddenly, like a badly performed play where there's no time in between cues. They shake off the centuries of dust – or is it just moments? – to play their part in this divine drama.

In Moses and Elijah, we have two old Jews. I can imagine them as those two old Muppets – Waldorf and Statler – who sit in their balcony box and crack wise as the ridiculous and the sublime unfold before them. And what else is God's presence on earth if not ridiculous and sublime? The story of God and God's people that we learn through the Bible is too fantastical to be made up, for who could ever devise a character like our God? And that God, our God, has a knack for tapping the strangest humans to do the divine work.

Over there stands old Moses. (*Laurie raises her hand*) At 120 years old, he's holding up pretty well. Moses has always been a law-and-order guy. He loves the structure and meaning that God's Torah gives to human life. He's an institutional man and an institution of a man. Who better to receive the Commandments? Who better to embody God's order during the disorder of the plagues, the exodus and life in the wilderness?

And over here is Elijah (**Torrell raises his hand**), a little younger and a tad less stressed, which happens you're carried off into heaven instead of dying. Who wouldn't be less stressed if they didn't have to die? But Elijah is old enough and possesses a certain wildness about him, which always makes for a good prophet. He projects charisma. He is always in the moment. He has an aura of uncertainty, especially compared to his compatriot, coming from a life lived on the margins, always having to stay one step ahead of his enemies.

After they reconnect with their old friend Jesus – who they haven't seen since the angels were rehearsing their piece for the shepherds – they get to watch such rookies as Peter, James and John stumble through their first divine mountain-top experience:

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.”

Moses says...

Well done! He's a little too eager, but that one has a good head on his shoulders. I was on Sinai with Yahweh for six weeks, and I sure could have used a place to sleep at night. Boy, there's nothing like that feeling of God's presence, is there, Eli? It gets into your soul, soaks into your bones. There's nothing on earth like God's glory, nothing at all. It puts a glow on your skin and makes your hair perfect for a month. I would have never gone back down if all of those people weren't down there. All the while, as we were on top of the mountain, going through the ins and outs of the whole law, I kept wishing there'd be another six weeks of policy on things like wilderness survival, women in leadership, and social media, just so I could stay there.

Elijah replies...

But you don't know how to use a smart phone, Mo, and you can't stay there anyway. You know that. And why do you need a dwelling out here? We just got here, and we won't be stopping for long. That's the whole point of God's presence – we get just enough for the moment at hand. The boy made a rookie mistake. You can't build a house in God's presence. They tried that with two Temples and look what happened. God doesn't stay in one place forever. When I was on Mount Horeb, it was over in fifteen minutes – an earthquake, a fire, silence, some Holy Presence and a quick pep talk. Then, back down you go. And if it's good enough me...

Nothing's good enough for you, Eli. You're a prophet. That's one of your things.

I was saying – Mo – if it's good enough for me, it's good enough for them. The world needs more people on fire for God, and that only takes a drop of the Divine. There's work to be done out in the world. I know it. You know it. They know it. Get back out there.

But they need more time, Eli, because they won't be coming back here. And with what's ahead of them, those next forty days, they need for God's presence to sink in so it won't rub off. It's just a dwelling. It won't kill anyone. The world can wait a little. In fact, the world's too important not to wait for them to get it right, before they head out.

While he was still speaking, suddenly a bright cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud a voice said, "This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!"

(Sighs:) I've heard that before.

So have they, you old goody two-shoes. That's what Yahweh said at the boy's baptism. 'This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased.' What a line! Always go with the classics. That's good parenting, encouraging the boy and his friends.

You're missing the point, Eli. They need to listen to him. And not just about the death and resurrection thing. I sure hope someone's writing that bit down. They need to listen to everything he's saying – the difficult parts about God and neighbors, wealth, the lost sheep, Caesar's image and God's image, judgment and forgiveness, sheathing your sword, the coming Kingdom – you know, everything. That's the problem with people, they don't listen.

We're people, Mo.

The best people. The kind you don't see anymore.

But we didn't always listen, Mo. That's my point. We don't listen so well, even to the good speakers like your brother Aaron and me, and when they do, the words pass too quickly. That's why you need to get folks' attention. People remember how they feel. So, surprise them. Get under their skin. Challenge the false prophets to sacrifice contest. Lie in the dirt and shout strange things. Wear camel's hair and eat insects.

As long as they're kosher.

(Sighs:) As long as they're kosher. People need lots of reminders and often. These people have spent a few years with Jesus, which must feel like a lifetime. But they're still picking up the basics from him. Not after today, though. After today, what Jesus says will stick. They need this moment of God's grace and glory and dazzling light to get them on track. We did, too. Everyone does. A long list of rules doesn't do it all, Mo.

But it helps, Eli. The rules give order and structure to the grace. The rules make regular life possible and pretty good. And the important ones are the simplest and the best. No other Gods. Honor your family. Don't lie or steal or sleep around. And for God's sake, rest! People need rules to remind them in between the God moments in their lives. Life is long and hard. You know as well as I do that God can feel distant and even uninvolved. People need to keep reading and meditating on the basics. Oh, speaking of God moments...

When the disciples heard this, they fell to the ground and were overcome by fear.
But Jesus came and touched them, saying, "Get up and do not be afraid."

Good kid. Well, that's the whole deal there, isn't it? Get up and don't be afraid.

What about the awe, Mo? Weren't we just saying how important the awe is – the feeling you get from the presence of God? Good skin, perfect hair, soaks into your bones – I seem to remember an old man saying something about that.

I was, and you're wrong, Eli. Awe isn't fear. Fear debilitates you. Fear limits you. Fear freezes you in your tracks. When God called out of the burning bush, that was fear. It took me ten minutes to get my shoes off. The bush wasn't consumed, but my toes almost were. But awe is something different. Awe reorients you. Awe encourages you. Awe transforms you. You know this. God isn't in the earthquake or the fire – those are fearful things. God is in the silence. The silence is where the awe is. God speaks so clearly in that still, small voice.

You're right, Old Man, you're right. Look, they're getting up. Time to go. Otherwise, that fool will build our dwellings after all, and then we'll be stuck here forever. I have a croquet match at 4 with Elisha, Ruth and Naomi. If you haven't seen Naomi mad, well then that's fear.

Friends, when we look up, we see no one except Jesus himself, alone. The story of Jesus' life alternates between miracles like this one and teachings like the Sermon on the Mount. And it turns out we need both of them.

We need the miracles to awe us into our proper place of trust and intimacy with the ineffable mystery of God's being. We need those mountain-top experiences to connect us so closely to God that our faces shine and our hair is perfect for a month. Perhaps yours is getting lost in the beauty of music, the energy of a youth conference or the stillness of the created natural world, maybe even in the mountains. Without such transcendence, the rules become drudgery, and we slowly drift away from our faith. So, let us worship regularly, on the suspicion that God might just show up and transform us somehow. It's no accident that Moses, Elijah and the disciples all meet God on a mountain. God, it seems, has a predisposition to connect with us when we are in a separate time and space set aside for it. Let us seek out the places where we seem to find God most often and dwell there.

But without the holy commandments – the ones Moses recorded and Jesus championed – there is no guidance for our lives. We shoot off every which way in a desperate search for divinity. We make idols out of anything with even a hint of transcendence to it. We paying no attention to the unique character of the God we know through the commandments. Without them, without the Scriptures to remind us of them, without regular participation in our faith community to practice them together, we walk off that mountain top into a chasm. So, let us read the Bible this week. As Lent approaches, let us dust off the old disciplines of ashes and contemplation, of giving something up and simplifying. Let us, as God's voice instructs, listen to Jesus, especially when he's talking about the hard stuff.

But first let us feast. Let us dine in God's own presence – just as the first followers of Jesus did – and share a table with people from every time and place. Let us take a piece of bread as we remember God's grace in our lives, and let us wash it down with juice from a cup that runneth over. Let this moment at the table be a dazzling, transfiguring one, when we know Jesus as he is. For it is just a moment, and soon we will be up from the table and about God's business in the world. And as we go from the table, let the tastes linger in our mouths, reminding us of the real banquet that is to come with Elijah, Moses and Jesus himself. Amen.