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Trinity Episcopal Church

Exodus 34: 29 – 35

Psalm 99

2 Corinthians 3: 12 – 4:2

Luke 9: 28 – 36 (37 – 43)

“On the mountain, a man bent in prayer erupts in sudden light. As glory leaks from every pore, three sleepy disciples cower in the grass and watch their Master glow. Two figures appear out of time and space; in solemn tones they speak of exodus, accomplishment, Jerusalem. The disciples, comprehending nothing, babble nonsense in response – ‘Let’s make tents! Let’s stay here always! This is good!’ A cloud descends, thick and impenetrable. As it envelopes the disciples, they fall to their faces, certain the end has come. But a Voice addresses them instead, tender and gentle. ‘This is my Son, my Chosen.’ The Voice hums with delight, and the disciples, braver now, look up. They gaze at their Master – the Shining One – and a Father’s pure joy sings with the stars. ‘This is my Beloved Son. Listen to him.’

In the valley, a boy writhes in the dust. He drools, he cannot hear, and his eyes – wide open, feral – see nothing but darkness. Around him, a crowd gathers and swells, eager for spectacle. Scribes jeer, and disciples wring their hands in shame. ‘Frauds!’ someone yells into the night. ‘Charlatans!’ ‘Where’s your Master?’ the scribes ask the disciples for the umpteenth time. ‘Why has he left you?’ ‘We don’t know,’ the disciples mutter, gesturing vaguely at the mountain. Panic wars with exhaustion as they hear the boy shriek yet again – an echo straight from hell. He flails, and his limbs assault his stricken face. A voice – strangled, singular – rends the night. ‘This is my son!’ a man cries out as he pushes through the crowd to gather the convulsing boy into his arms. Everyone stares as the father cradles the wreck of a child against his chest. ‘Please,’ he sobs to the stars. ‘Please. This is my beloved son. Listen to him!’”

This is the Rev. Debie Thomas’ retelling of today’s Gospel lesson. Actually, it’s a retelling of the first part of the lesson, and an imagining of what transpires in the valley before Jesus and his three friends descend. Thomas does a wonderful job of laying the two seemingly disparate parts of the lesson alongside each other in a way that invites comparison and more clearly says that they are *not* disparate, but integrally intertwined. That they are a piece, one with the other. It’s a way of saying, “Meanwhile back at the ranch.” Because while Jesus and three of his disciples are having a mountaintop experience, the disciples in the valley are experiencing something very different.

Matthew, Mark and Luke all tell the story of the transfiguration, and all of them follow it with the story of the boy with the seizures. And even though our lectionary has paired these two stories for a long time, we tend to give short shrift to the story in the valley and only highlight the mountaintop. Maybe it’s because we have some sort of need to try to explain the ineffable, the inexplicable, that which is beyond words. And when we can’t really explain it, we come up with theological insights. Or maybe we are drawn to the mountaintop as an escape from what is going on in the valley. Or maybe because it’s easier to puzzle over the story, rather than see it writ large in our world – all of us who enjoy a mountaintop lifestyle in the privileged northern and western hemispheres, while so many others experience incredible poverty, life-threatening hunger and disease, and the violence and destruction of war. Or, seen from an opposite perspective, writ large as those of us in the developed, affluent world are in the valleys of frenetic lifestyles, anxiety and loneliness, while others, with far less material comforts, enjoy mountaintop living with extended families, renewing cultural traditions and rituals, and communities that nurture one another.

Years ago, when I was probably 10 or 11, my parents and I went to an art exhibit at our local mall. I don't remember anything else about it except my mother and I puzzling over one painting in particular. It was a canvas, perhaps 30" wide x 3' tall, divided in half vertically, with the left half painted white and the right half painted black. Somewhere in the middle of that line between black and white, the canvas was split, torn really, in about a 5" gash. The painting was entitled "I have been to the mountaintop." Even then, I realized that it referred to Martin Luther King, Jr.'s final speech given on April 3, 1968 in Memphis, TN. He was assassinated the next day, and that had been a relatively recent event.

At the time, and because it seemed like such a simple composition, my mother's and my response was "What's so special about that? I can do that good!" But we were missing the point. The fact that I can still remember what the painting looked like and still remember pondering over it with my mother attests to the strong value it actually held for me. It seems like the perfect metaphor for holding these two stories, mountaintop and valley, side by side. Martin Luther King, Jr. had a vision of what could one day be, but like the painter of this piece of art, he knew first hand that the real world, the valley, was a long ways from that vision, with many divisions and much brokenness. And King knew that the valley coexisted with that mountaintop kind of vision.

Martin Luther King, Jr. was able to hold these two – the vision and the reality – in tension. And that's what Luke (and Matthew and Mark) ask of us. It's the old "yes, but not yet" – yes, the Kingdom of God is already breaking into this world, but it isn't complete yet. So our challenge as Christians is to hold the vision, the hope, the faith alongside the reality of the world we experience every day. How does the glory that enlivens and enlightens the whole mountaintop speak to the agony transpiring down in the valley? Can we, as the Rev. Thomas puts it, speak glory to agony and agony to glory? What does it mean that the mountaintop and the valley share the same landscape? Can a love song on a pinnacle, Thomas asks, reach a scream in the depths? What happens if it can't? Aren't there two beloved sons in this story?

Does anyone down below have any idea of what is happening up above? Does God's glory reflect or refract to bounce off the trees and people below? Is there a single ray of light that pierces through the cloud to the scene below? What does the cloud look like from the underside – is it dark and menacing? Or does it look like it has a silver lining? Does it hide the top of the mountain from view? Is there the sound of thunder when the voice anoints, claims, loves Jesus? We aren't going to know in this lifetime.

It's clear that Jesus invites these three friends, the disciples who seem to be closest to Jesus, to ascend the mountain with him. And it's clear that the others have to spend the time below in a challenging, frustrating, unproductive, inhospitable situation, as they try repeatedly and fail repeatedly to do the work that Jesus has given them to do. And it's clear that things become very ugly and threatening, filled with anger and suspicion, despair and doubt. It's clear that there are two father-and-son combos who are deeply bound by love; one experiencing glory and the other besieged by agony. It's clear that there are many people who are keenly missing Jesus' presence, while just a few are nearly overcome with the glory emanating from Jesus.

It's important that we learn to hear our own story in the stories in the Bible. But we also must learn to hear our collective, corporate story in the Bible. Because our faith is not a 'Jesus and me' kind of faith, rather it is 'God and us.' So that my mountaintop is side by side with your valley. And vice versa. We're all in this together, because while each of us is God's beloved son or daughter, we exist as the people of God. It's entirely possible for you to be sitting here in church, feeling the loving presence of God while someone else, just in front of you or down the pew, is in the midst of some sort of anguish. Just like this is true in the wider lens of our community and the world. We are challenged to hold both the mountain top and the valley in a dynamic tension, as Thomas says, denying neither and embracing both. We are challenged, as Christians, to do this seemingly impossible work out of pure $\pi\pi\pi\pi\pi$, pure love for each other, for every human being, so that no one is left out, whether they are wrapped in glory or wailing in agony; so that no one is ever really alone.

Jesus and Peter and James and John come down from the mountain. Jesus heals the boy that his disciples couldn't help. It is always tempting to just sort of gloss over that story and say "all is well." But by placing it where it is, the evangelists keep reminding us to not forget the suffering that comes before the healing. To honor the suffering by naming and acknowledging it. The father's agony, perhaps mirrored when Jesus is on the cross, is the source of his plea to Jesus. Most of us have found ourselves in that place at some point in our lives. That cry of anguish is perhaps the most deeply felt prayer that any of us ever utter.

It's the Last Sunday after the Epiphany. Wednesday will be Ash Wednesday and the beginning of Lent. So after weeks of hints dropped like a trail of breadcrumbs – a guiding, shining star, something like a dove, six massive jars of water become wine – we now have arrived at the apex of Epiphanies, the Transfiguration. Today, we get a brilliant light, the glory of God. We get the voice of God, claiming, anointing, presenting, revealing Jesus as the Son of God. And we get the tormented voice of another father, revealing his son also as beloved. We go from this glorious, brilliant light of Epiphany into the darkness, the solemnity of Lent. What voices will speak to us during Lent? What valleys will we traverse? What mountaintops will give us vision? Where will we be attuned to glory, and where to agony? Whatever voices we hear, whichever topography we experience, we are asked to not flinch or flee, but to abide and believe. Both voices, both places are filled with the presence and the power of God. Both voices, both places have much to teach us and we must not hold up one at the expense of the other. We just need to listen to the voice of God, a God who calls each of us beloved. +