

“Gazing That Leads to Discovery”

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When one is part of a communal narrative that includes angels that speak, celestial glory that guides, once we have walked, in our minds and hearts, along the seashore and heard the call to “follow” the one known as the Christ, well, we grow to see – at the very least with the eyes of our hearts – the glory all around us in the mundane and ordinary. “Gazing is such a wonderful thing.... When gazing, we are turned completely outward. But just when we are so turned, things seem to go on within us, which have been waiting longingly for the moment in which they should be observed.” Had Peter been a poet and not a fisherman, I suspect he could have made such an observation, once he returned from his mountain experience with Jesus. This insight into “gazing,” however, comes from the Austrian poet Rainer Maria Rilke, who wrote these words to his wife, Clare (in 1907). Gazing is such a wonderful thing.

The season of Epiphany that today comes to an end does so in a blaze of light. The story of the Transfiguration. Every writer I consulted this week suggests that this story is essential to understanding the nature of Christian spirituality. Why? Because the upshot of the story is that it is difficult to change ourselves by tinkering with ourselves. Real change, or to use religious term “transformation,” takes place deeply, and, at first unconsciously, as we focus our attention not on ourselves as objects of fascination, but on the mystery we call God. Martin Smith puts it this way: “Jesus climbs the mountain not “to work on himself” as we Americans say, but to seek the face of God...and when Jesus looks there by faith, he, himself, shines with divine light.”

Gazing at God? I’m not exactly sure what that means, but that hasn’t stopped me from practicing it for over 40 years. In some strange and limited way greater incandescence has enliven and enlightened me. OK, I’ve never been the brightest bulb; my mother may not like to admit that, even though she knows it. But I burn a little brighter now than before.

Of course, gazing is not idle worship or devotion but activity, as in practices and disciplines, that distract us from self-preoccupation. Somehow – this is the old, old story that we are still hearing and telling – somehow, by seeing Jesus transfigured we realize that we can be changed, too. In Paul’s second letter to the Corinthians, he says in chapter three, “All of us, with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord, the Spirit.” Transfiguration.

Before we gather around the table, let me draw our attention to two lines in today’s reading. The first one is “And they were terrified.” Terrified. Writer and pastor Steve Garnaas-Holmes suggests that we not be fooled by what he calls the “neon friendliness,” signs that sell manufactured comfort and security. He cautions us not to fall for “the allure of great figures like Moses and Elijah and Elvis,” who assure us that we are “on the road to the stars. And he cautions, too, that we not be taken in by our own cleverness, you know the cleverness in thinking we can put God in a box and then move on to solve other mysteries. Why not just confess, Garnaas-Holmes asks, “that it is terrifying to stand too close to a speeding train, to get near to the power of God, the light that can change you into your own unknown, the mystery that will surely consume you, the love that will crack your life open till the light all

spills out and you are drawn to the cross, kicking and screaming and grateful. Surely Jesus was a little freaked out that day on the mountain. To be turned into pure light? As with any...as with any great force, if you're not scared, you are not paying attention."

The first phrase was "And they were terrified." Here's the second phrase that jumps out at us. "Listen to him." From a cloud a Voice speaks, and says: "This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him." And they looked around and saw no one but Jesus. Listen to him, and the Voice was not singling out Elijah or Moses! Not Moses, the champion of the Law. Not Elijah, perhaps the greatest of the prophets. Listen to this Other one. But listening is not so easy. A former president, don't remember which one, supposedly once said that running a country is like running a cemetery; you've got a lot of people under you and nobody's listening. Do you ever speak and find that nobody is listening? Have you ever been criticized for not paying attention? I suspect we all have. Perhaps you know the saying that "most conversations are simply monologues delivered in the presence of witnesses." Or how about this less sophisticated quip: God has given us two ears and one mouth, because listening is twice as hard as talking. Robert Herron says that good listening is like tuning in a radio station. For good results, you can listen to only one station at a time. "Listening," he writes, "requires a choice of where to place your attention." (*Homemade*, June, 1987)

Listen to him, the Voice says. And surely they did, even though they did not always understand what he was saying. And here we are, so many years later. A little terrified? Perhaps. One of my favorite James Michener's lines, is directed to young people, but helpful for everybody on a Transfiguration Sunday: Seek the next experience that will knock you off center. Pretty good advice for us, as we prepare on Wednesday to set out for Jerusalem, a journey under the lengthening shadows of a cross. Are you, am I, willing to be knocked off center? We'll see.