

**See. Hear. Act.**

Every year at this time in the church year, the week before Lent begins, this story known as the Transfiguration of Christ appears. It's as predictable as the story of the birth of Jesus at Christmas, or his resurrection at Easter, or the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. And every year I think, what could this story possibly mean to 21<sup>st</sup> century people, who are schooled in science and history and skepticism?

It is a weird story. Many of us like Jesus for his wise teaching and his godly example of how to live. "What would Jesus do?" is at least a theoretical guide for our life. Many of us appreciate the church's traditions of music and prayer, Bible study and fellowship—but let's skip the portions of the Bible which seem outdated, thank you very much. Most of us accept *a bit* of mystery and include *some* unexplainable tenets in our belief system as an act of faith. The virgin birth. The incarnation. The resurrection of the body. But a story like the one I just read, the Transfiguration—well, many among us, let's be honest, would like to have a rational explanation for what really happened on that mountaintop.

The Bible doesn't give a rational explanation. It just tells the story.

Jesus and 3 disciples—Peter, James, and John—went for a hike one day up to a mountaintop. Their purpose—a time for prayer. A retreat in the mountains. So far, we get it. And while Jesus was praying, Peter, James, and John were getting sleepy. This is easy to relate to.

But then, something happened. Jesus began to glow. Two additional figures appeared out of nowhere, and everyone knew they were Moses and Elijah, both of whom had been dead for centuries. "Hi, I'm Moses and this is my friend Elijah. We didn't live at the same time, but we met in heaven and we're here today to talk with Jesus." I don't think it went that way, but I do wonder how the poor disciples recognized these faces from the distant past.

According to Luke, the conversation with Jesus concerned his upcoming departure. We know what this is going to look like. Jesus has told his disciples he will be tortured and killed. Like Luke, we live on this side of the resurrection, this side of history. Moses and Elijah, representatives of the Law and the Prophets, apparently know what is still to come for Jesus and for his disciples.

Then Peter, who sometimes seems to understand and sometimes seems to be in a fog, speaks out of the fog of his humanness. "Let's make booths up here on the mountain. One for you, Jesus, and one for Moses, and one for Elijah. Let's memorialize this event." Nice try, Peter. The sky suddenly clouds over, and they all hear the unmistakable voice of God, just as some heard it at Jesus' baptism, saying, "This is my Son. This is my Beloved. This is my Chosen one. LISTEN to him!"

And then life went back to normal. They went down the mountain, where people were suffering and Jesus' disciples didn't seem to be able to do anything about it. So once again, Jesus healed a needy child.

When the Bible gives us an unexplainable story, what can we do with it? Our choices are several. First, we could dismiss the story as a tale told by people whose understanding of reality was limited by their lack of knowledge and sophistication. We don't believe the myths of other ancient peoples, why should we believe the myths of the Biblical tradition?

A second option is the opposite. We could decide that whatever the Bible says, even when it contradicts all our experience of the way the world works, must be true just as it is told, because it is in the Bible. The Bible's stories, according to this option, are literally true, because they are in the Bible.

The third option is the only one I find viable, but it's not an easy option. And that is to do what the voice of God tells us to do in this strange story. Listen to Jesus. Listen to the mystery. Admit that we don't know everything about the way the world works, and we certainly don't know everything about the way God works. Listen for truth that transcends the literal reading. Listen in the context of the entire Christ narrative. Listen to what all the Biblical witnesses are seeking to say, within the limits of human language, about the One who is behind the narrative, beyond the realm of earthly human knowledge, above all and in all and through all. Listening this way, this story gives us a peek behind the curtain, a moment of clarity about God's purposes and ways.

This story tells us that Christ is at the center of the divine-human story. It invites us to see him, as Peter, James, and John saw him, and even as Moses and Elijah saw him that strange day. He is at the center, the one to whom the Hebrew Bible points and in whom the church originates. He is the icon of God. Our current use of that term as an image on a computer screen still works for this metaphor. Click on Jesus, and God will open up for you. See Jesus, the human one, the Christ, and you'll see more than you ever dreamed of seeing. You'll begin to see God.

This story also tells us to listen to him, take his message to heart, hear him. In the context of the 9<sup>th</sup> chapter of Luke's gospel, it is very clear what the disciples have been having trouble hearing and comprehending. Jesus has been telling them of the suffering which lies ahead, that his road means rejection and a violent death before resurrection. He's been saying that their road likewise requires self-denial and a cross, that this isn't a straight path to earthly glory and fame. Christ's disciples need to be ready to sacrifice everything, lose their life for his sake, deny themselves for God's sake. (Luke 9:22-25) They look at him dumbly, then the three join him on the mountain climbing trek where they are given a single imperative — **Listen** to him! And on the far side of that episode, Jesus tells them ***“Let these words sink into your ears. The Son of Man is going to be betrayed into human hands.”*** (Luke 9:44) Christian discipleship is hard. The world is hard. The path to redemption passes through suffering and death. Let this sink into your ears, your minds, and your hearts. Listen to Jesus, the Chosen One of God, who speaks the truth.

This story also tells us to act as Jesus acted. On the far side of the mountain hike, the crowd has been waiting for Jesus to return. His waiting disciples have been useless in the face of human suffering. They don't know what to do with an epileptic child. Jesus is exasperated with them, and scolds them before he heals the boy. His time on earth is fast approaching its end, and his disciples don't yet understand that his mission is their mission, and his power is their power.

And that's the place where we find ourselves. Our sight is limited. Our hearing is dull. And our faith that we can take action in the name and power of Christ is weak. But thanks to the testimony of the Bible, we can see Christ. We can listen to him. And we can act as his agents in the world.

I recently read a book about a Honduran teenager who left poverty and violence in his homeland to travel to the United States to be reunited with his mother after years of separation. An American journalist named Sonia Nazario published the book in 2006. *Enrique's Journey*, the title of the book, (Random House, New York) took place in the year 2000. So it is background to today's migration stories, not necessarily the story of the migrants arriving at our borders now.

Nazario traces Enrique's journey on freight trains across the length of Mexico. Riding atop freight trains is dangerous enough, but along the hazard-filled way, he is robbed and beaten by bandits. He encounters corrupt and cruel police officers and immigration authorities. He is harassed by people who are fearful and angry at the migrants traveling through their towns and small farmlands, who have stories to tell about the migrants' criminal behavior. Some of them throw rocks at the migrants on the trains.

But in some regions of Mexico, he encounters a different reaction. Villagers who listen intently for the diesel horn of the freight trains. And when they hear a train coming, they grab food and clothing and bottles of water, and then run to the tracks so they can toss these gifts of life to the migrants on the moving trains. In another village, the church offers filthy, weary, and hungry migrants a place to sleep, and refuge from deportation. What makes these villages different? Nazario discovers that in these communities, the priests teach their parishioners that Jesus said he could be found in the least of these—the hungry, the thirsty, the needy one. (Mt. 25) In the state of Veracruz, this emphasis on mercy and hospitality can be traced all the way to the bishop. All the churches of the diocese, as well as local businesses and families, support the ministries of compassion for the migrants. And the people of the region, who live in poverty themselves, act as their church teaches, showing extraordinary kindness to strangers.

And on a mountaintop in Veracruz, overlooking the rail line and the villages, stands a 60-foot tall statue of Jesus with his arms stretched wide.

Christ's mission is our mission, and his power is our power. We are not helpless in the presence of human suffering. We are called by Christ to enter that suffering and embrace it as our own, for in suffering he is already there. We who are his disciples follow him where reason and logic might tell us to steer clear, where the world's sense would tell us to look out for ourselves, and where our fear would tell us we are powerless to do anything. But there is truth beyond reason and logic. God's sense is wiser than the world's sense. And faith overcomes fear. In Christ, resurrection lies beyond suffering. In Christ, we find our strength and power to do good.

Christ's mission is our mission, and his power is our power. Gaze at his glory, listen to his message, and return to the world to act in his name.

For the sake of God's eternal love.

Amen.