

A Vision of Salvation

Exodus 34:29-35; Luke 9:28-43

Transfiguration Sunday, (Feb.27) 2022

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God is not always silent, and man [sic] is not always blind. In every man's [sic] there are moments when there is a lifting of the veil at the horizon of the known, opening a sight of the eternal. Each of us has at least once in his life experienced the momentous reality of God. Each of us has once caught a glimpse of the beauty, peace, and power that flow through the souls of those devoted to Him... The remembrance of that experience and loyalty to the response of that moment are the forces that sustain our faith.

- Abraham Joshua Heschel

Theologian Tom Long tells of being in a meeting of a university chaplains' advisory council some years ago. An older member of the council asked, "What are the students like morally these days?" Several of the chaplains looked at one another. The Methodist chaplain spoke up, "Well," she said, "I think you'd be pleased. They are pretty ambitious in terms of careers, but that's not all they are. A lot of them tutor kids after school. Some work in the night shelter and the soup kitchen for the homeless. Last week a group protested apartheid in South Africa..." As she talked, the Jewish chaplain began to grin. The more she talked, the more he grinned, until finally it became distracting. "Ed, am I saying something funny?" she said, slightly miffed. "No, no, I'm sorry," he replied. "I was just sitting here thinking. You are saying the university students are good people, and you're right. And you're saying that they are involved in good social causes, and they are. But what I was thinking is that the one thing they lack is a vision of salvation." He

went on, “No, it’s true. If you don’t have some vision of what God is doing to repair the whole creation, you can’t get up every day and work in a soup kitchen. It finally beats you down” (from Thomas G. Long, *Preaching from Memory to Hope*, p. 123-124).

This vision of salvation, repair of the whole creation is another way to speak of the big picture of what God is doing. Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel said, there are moments when “there is a lifting of the veil at the horizon of the known, opening a sight of the eternal,” and this moment and our memory and response to that moment is the heart of faith. In other words, it is when we experience something holy and profound that touches us deeply that our lives are permanently changed. It is when we see differently and can never go back to seeing things the old way. And it is when we realize it’s about God. It’s a vision of salvation.

In our Gospel today the disciples are present when the veil at the horizon of the known is lifted. They glimpse a vision of salvation. At this juncture in Luke, Jesus probably knows that what is happening in his ministry is going to result in his torture and death. If he keeps doing what he’s doing and keeps saying what he’s saying, the Powers of Death and Darkness will kill him. He knows this. He feels the stress and the heaviness; the darkness of death hangs over him. So, Jesus does what he always does; he goes off to pray, and he takes his most trusted friends: Peter, John, and James.

Luke’s first line says, “Now about eight days after these sayings...” (9:28). That’s a clue of something momentous. The eighth day symbolized the new creation. Old creation happened in six days, and the Sabbath rest was on the seventh. The eighth day was new creation. So, Luke is saying, “Pay attention!

You're going to glimpse the eighth day. For a moment the veil will be lifted. Get ready and take notes."

Jesus takes Peter, James, and John up with him on a mountain. He is praying and, as usual, they want to go to sleep, bored while Jesus is over there praying. Suddenly, Jesus' appearance changes. He turns dazzlingly white. A brightness that comes from within shines outward. And then just as suddenly, two men are standing talking to him – Moses and Elijah: Moses the great lawgiver of Israel and Elijah the great prophet of Israel. The three talk as equals, as if they had known one another, and they talk about Jesus' "exodus," his facing death and what he going to do about it. Moses and Elijah, I think, are saying, "Jesus, we know that you're feeling the Darkness and Death but don't give up. Don't give in. There is only the whole redemption of the entire cosmos riding on this. No pressure. God is with you. God will sustain you. God will transform you. This transfiguration is simply a preview of what God will do when you are resurrected and someday, when all of creation becomes the new creation."

In the middle of this, Peter speaks up. When the Lord is standing there talking with Moses and Elijah, how could you say anything? But Peter never misses the chance to talk; deciding that someone needs to make a suggestion, he says, "Let's build some dwellings for you and Moses and Elijah to stay in while you talk with one another." This is a high and holy moment, let's stay here for a while. Let's bask in the presence of Jesus, Moses, and Elijah, and just stay here.

Again, suddenly they all are engulfed in a cloud. Peter and James and John are terrified. They hear a voice that say, "This is my Son, my chosen, listen to him!"

After the voice has spoken, the cloud disappears, Moses and Elijah are gone, Jesus looks normal, and Peter, James, and John keep their mouths shut.

It says, “Jesus was found alone.”

This is a strange, mystical experience that cannot be explained, only reported. In one shining moment the veil between Jesus and us was pulled back and we saw a stunning revelation of who he is. In that moment Jesus is reminded of who he is so he can go on and face the cross.

Suffering and humiliation are coming, and we are privy to the truth of who Jesus really is. Overwhelmed, exhausted, with the cracks and fault-lines in our lives, in our families, our church, and in this world turning into eruptions and earthquakes, here is a vision of Jesus the One who went through suffering and death so we might get through it. In near despair over the White Right, Authoritarianism, climate change, guns, and racism, here we are given a glimpse of the big picture of God’s salvation and repair of the world – the Holy One of the Living God, who will die but be resurrected and in turn will resurrect the entire cosmos.

Luke says they came down from the mountain only to be greeted by a crowd and a man shouting for Jesus to come and look at his son who is possessed by a spirit which throws the boy down in convulsions. The man says, “I begged your disciples to cast out the spirit, but they could not” (Luke 9:40). Jesus gets aggravated at the crowd and his disciples, “You people wear me out. You know nothing of God and of God’s work.” Just then the demon threw the boy to the

ground in convulsions. Jesus intervened, ordering the demon to be gone, healing the boy, and giving him back to his father, with everyone amazed at the work of God.

In Mark's version of this story found in chapter 9, Jesus comes down the mountain to face the crowd and the convulsing boy and his father. He casts out the unclean spirit, takes the boy by the hand and lifts him up (same resurrection language as last week!). Later the disciples ask, "Why couldn't we cast the demon out?" And Jesus says, "This can only be done through prayer" (Mk. 9:28-29).

All three of the Synoptic Gospels, Matthew, Mark, and Luke, tell this story in the same way, and whoever tells it, there is a thickness of meaning. It is multilayered and comes to us on sorts of levels. But this morning, I want to you hear this: we can't deal with the problems down in the valley without spending time on the mountaintop in prayer and worship. Likewise, if we're on the mountaintop in the presence of the Living God, we know that this same God will send us, indeed, lead us down the mountain to the issues and concerns and problems of our lives and our world.

We will not have the holy awe and gratitude to cast out demons and minister in a convulsing world without spending time with the living God. And if you tell me, that you are so busy that you can't spend time with the Living God in prayer and worship, then my response is, how's that working for you?

In Mark's version, the father of the boy says to Jesus, "I believe, help my unbelief." Many of us struggle with belief and doubt. But these days, our big struggle is not belief and doubt as much as busy-ness and lack of time. Our cry to

Jesus is, “I believe, help my lack of time.” To survive the world in the valley, takes time with the Living God in worship and prayer up on the mountain. Which makes me wonder, when we think of Austin Heights as a counter-cultural church, perhaps we need to be most counter-cultural about time and work overload. Instead of working according to the *chronos* – one damn thing after another – how might we start learning to live by *kairos* – sacred time.

Parent, activist, and writer Lydia Wylie-Kellermann, in her book, *The Sandbox Revolution: Raising Kids for a Just World*, echoes Joanna Macy when she says “we stand in a time of great unraveling. All that lies just below the surface is being uncovered.” She goes on, “We need this transformation, but the collapse is painful.” Then what Wylie-Kellermann does is explore how we invite our children, together, into this time of great unraveling of climate change, gun violence, racism, and war. She explores how we raise them with joy and hope and resilience? (pp. xi-xii). Wylie-Kellermann uses different language but follows Joanna Macy in suggesting that this great unraveling is also “the great turning.” Something new is emerging, and the old does not like it and is fighting to hold on.

Here on this mountaintop and in this valley in this story, we are witnesses to great unraveling and great turning. We catch a glimpse of the vision of the transfigured Christ who will transfigure all of us and all of creation. At the same time, we witness the chaos and unraveling, doubt, powerlessness, and convulsions down in the valley. And we get to witness Jesus Christ healing, setting a boy free, and the emergence of the new creation.

Prayer is the tie that binds all these things together. Jesus went to the mountain to pray. He is transfigured. And it is through prayer that he is able to

redeem and transform the convulsions in the valley.

In late January of 1956 Martin Luther King had just turned 26 years of age and was the leader of the Montgomery Bus Boycott, which had been going on for almost two months. At first the White Power System figured the bus boycott would last only a few days and then be over, but now, after two months, it was beginning to have an economic impact in the city. By now, Martin Luther King was getting 40 phone calls a day at his house with death threats. One night he came home exhausted, afraid, and ready to give up. Coretta was already asleep, so King went into the kitchen to make some coffee and began to pace. The phone rang and King picked it up only to hear another death threat, "You get out of town or you'll die." He later wrote, "With my cup of coffee sitting untouched before me, I tried to think of a way to move out of the picture without appearing a coward. In this state of exhaustion, when my courage had all but gone, I decided to take my problem to God. With my head in my hands, I bowed over the kitchen table and prayed aloud."

"I am here taking a stand for what I believe is right. But now I am afraid. The people are looking to me for leadership, and if I stand before them without strength and courage, they too will falter. I am at the end of my powers. I have nothing left. I've come to the point where I can't face it alone."

King went on, "At that moment, I experienced the presence of the Divine as I had never experienced God before. It seemed as though I could hear the quiet assurance of an inner voice saying: 'Stand up for justice, stand up for truth; and God will be at your side forever. I will be with you, even until the end of the world.' I heard the voice of Jesus saying still to fight on. He promised never to

leave me, never to leave me alone. No never alone. No never alone. He promised never to leave me, never to leave me alone.”

On this Last Sunday after Epiphany, it is good to be reminded that this came to be known as his “kitchen epiphany.” When Dr. King was at the end of his rope, this moment with God, this moment in which the veil was lifted, he caught a vision of salvation, through which God gave King strength and courage and determination for the rest of his life.

It was a moment that defined his life. A moment during prayer. Usually, it is only a moment and usually during prayer – which might tell us something about spending time with God in prayer.

One last statement to leave with you. Rebecca Solnit writes, “The future is dark, with a darkness as much of the womb as the grave” (*Hope in the Dark*, p. 5). New birth, new creation is breaking into this dark world. Through prayer we dive in and hold on!

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. One True God, Mother of us all. Amen.