

“We Crave Radiance”

Sermon by Oby Ballinger

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Luke 9:28-45

Now about eight days after these sayings Jesus took with him Peter and John and James, and went up on the mountain to pray. And while he was praying, the appearance of his face changed, and his clothes became dazzling white. Suddenly they saw two men, Moses and Elijah, talking to him. They appeared in glory and were speaking of his departure, which he was about to accomplish at Jerusalem. Now Peter and his companions were weighed down with sleep; but since they had stayed awake, they saw his glory and the two men who stood with him. Just as they were leaving him, Peter said to Jesus, “Master, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah” —not knowing what he said. While he was saying this, a cloud came and overshadowed them; and they were terrified as they entered the cloud. Then from the cloud came a voice that said, “This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!” When the voice had spoken, Jesus was found alone. And they kept silent and in those days told no one any of the things they had seen.

On the next day, when they had come down from the mountain, a great crowd met him. Just then a man from the crowd shouted, “Teacher, I beg you to look at my son; he is my only child. Suddenly a spirit seizes him, and all at once he shrieks. It convulses him until he foams at the mouth; it mauls him and will scarcely leave him. I begged your disciples to cast it out, but they could not.” Jesus answered, “You faithless and perverse generation, how much longer must I be with you and bear with you? Bring your son here.” While he was coming, the demon dashed him to the ground in convulsions. But Jesus rebuked the unclean spirit, healed the boy, and gave him back to his father.

And all were astounded at the greatness of God. While everyone was amazed at all that he was doing, he said to his disciples, “Let these words sink into your ears: The Son of Man is going to be betrayed into human hands.” But they did not understand this saying; its meaning was concealed from them, so that they could not perceive it. And they were afraid to ask him about this saying.

The poet Elizabeth Alexander is most well known for her poem “Praise Song for the Day,” which she wrote for President Barack Obama’s first inauguration. We have experienced anew this year the power of poetry on such occasions, and the sentiment was similar after her performance in 2009. Poetry uses what [Elizabeth Alexander describes](#) as “words that shimmer” to evoke splendor in what might otherwise be regarded as drab ordinariness. She says it this way in her poem “Allegiance”:

“We crave radiance in this austere world, light in the spiritual darkness.”

Jesus understands this hunger for glory in the grey of everyday life. Scripture tells us how he slips away at times for prayer and connection with God. In today’s passage, he takes a few disciples with him to pray at the top of a mountain. Peter, James and John climb with him, slipping away from the crowds below. They pray with him long enough to get sleepy, but all of a sudden their eyes are fully opened, filled with blinding light. Jesus’ true identity is revealed there on the mountaintop—the glory of God seen unmistakably in him as he talks with the forms of spiritual giants Moses and Elijah. A voice comes to the disciples from the cloud of divine presence with unmistakable clarity: “This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!” The crystalline light of God shines through with perfect clarity. Jesus is what we crave, our “radiance in this austere world”.

The very next day though, they come off the mountain and return to the mission of healing. Despite Peter’s desire to build shrines and stay in the glory, the path of Jesus leads into suffering. A great crowd meets Jesus, and a man cries out, “save my son, my only child! He’s got a demon, your disciples failed to heal him, and only you can help us!” Jesus is impatient that his disciples aren’t yet able to carry on his work, even though they *must* because he’s been reminded that he is going away soon. But while he rebukes the disciples for their faithlessness, he also follows it up immediately with the merciful

command: “Bring your son here.” Jesus heals the boy, restoring the only child back to his father. “And all were astounded at the greatness of God.”

Luke’s gospel here begins what will be a 10-chapter journey of Jesus to Jerusalem, which we will travel over the coming weeks in the season of Lent. It begins with a radiant transfiguration, yet leads to the deepest shadows of crucifixion. Jesus knows that is in his future, even when he’s up in the clouds. We read that he’s discussing his “departure” with Moses and Elijah. The word there is literally “exodus”, as in the Exodus out of Egypt, the beginning of a long journey through the wilderness to the Promised Land. The mountaintop radiance of Jesus fills him up for what is to come, and it affirms his divinity for the disciples, who cannot understand that the journey requires suffering as well as glory. Jerusalem holds tension and conflict, Jesus knows, and yet he leads his disciples there, carrying divine radiance as “light into the spiritual darkness”. Into accusation, betrayal, arrest and desertion. Into crucifixion on top of another mountain. Into an even more glorious and blinding resurrection. For Luke’s gospel then, the transfiguration is like an inauguration—a ceremonial and symbolic moment, a beginning to the journey.

We get such transfiguration passages in the course of our lives too. Mountaintop moments of clarity and purpose that we focus on and prepare for. Symbolic beginnings, like weddings, graduations, baptisms, or crossing the threshold of your first home. Times when it feels like there’s endless potential, and the sky’s the limit. Then, just as soon as we’ve paused at the radiant pinnacle, life pulls us back down into glum dreariness again. There are chores to do in the new home, diapers to change, work deadlines to meet, homework to help with, bills to pay, groceries to get, emails to answer, and everything else in the long everydayness of life. At this point in a year of unending pandemic precautions, too, our routines are even more constrained, and all the days start to blend together. It can be hard to remember why we’re doing any of this in the first place, or to trust that this will come to an end eventually. Will all the grey ordinariness drive out even the memory of radiance, or hope of its future return?

I believe that summer will come again, and I know that day will follow night, and I trust that there will be easier times on the other side of this pandemic. Yet the lesson of Scripture is that we don’t need to wait for the next Transfiguration. Though glory is most visible atop the mountain, it’s no less present down in the valleys. The Jesus whose radiance shines forth on high is the very same Jesus who wades into the crowds, returns to the work of healing, and who astounds them all at the greatness of God. Indeed, Jesus repeatedly exhorts the disciples to trust that God’s ways are found through paths of suffering and challenge, and not only on mountaintops. The glory moments by themselves are not sufficient to the life of faith, which also holds suffering and crucifixion.

Transfiguration moments make visible what is *always* true in “this austere world”. We are surrounded by the glory of God, if we have eyes to see and ears to hear it. Kathryn Matthews Huey puts it well when she writes that, “all the earth – all creation, broken yet beautiful, is full of the presence of God...God is in the beauty of nature, in all its glory; God is in those moments of unconditional, tender love we share; God is there, between the lines, when we share our stories and our fragile hopes; God is there, in our suffering and in every moment of rescue, restoration, and resurrection.”¹

When we go from worship, where might you be surprised by the presence of Christ? When will you be “astounded by the greatness of God” in surprising moments of healing? Wherever you are best reminded or your spirit fed in these challenging days, may the afterglow of Christ come to you in troubled and ordinary times. May the church be one space where we “crave radiance” together, and watch for the Holy Spirit to transform and illumine the everyday. Throughout the journey of Lent

¹ Kathryn Matthews Huey, “[Sermon Seeds](#)” for the Last Sunday after Epiphany Year C/Transfiguration, United Church of Christ: SAMUEL preaching aids, February 10, 2013.

that begins on Ash Wednesday this week, may God bring us moments that remind, refill, and recharge us. We explore shadows and brighten the darkness, accompanied in lofty and low places, in every moment, by a radiant God who lights the way. Amen.