

“MYSTERY AND MINISTRY”

Very recently on eBay I purchased some ancient coins from Israel that were made during the time of Christ. Among this currency I have a silver denarius with the image of Tiberius Caesar (the ruler of the Roman Empire at the time of Jesus’ birth), and a bronze prudah that bears the seal of the fifth prefect, or governor, of the region of Judea, a man named Pontius Pilate.

When I look at these coins, I like to imagine that the people who held them and purchased things with them 2000 years ago may have actually seen with their own eyes, or at least heard stories about an itinerant rabbi and healer named Jesus of Nazareth. Perhaps they were among the crowds that personally heard Jesus teach and preach when he walked the earth. Such imaginings help me to feel closer to our Lord and make him more tangible and real to me.

During my years in the ministry, I’ve had a number of people say to me that they wished they could somehow go back to Jesus’ time and see Jesus “in person,” so they could learn about him firsthand and know without question that he was the Messiah.

It would be interesting, wouldn’t it, to be able to climb into a time machine, travel back to First Century Palestine and see with our own eyes this Jewish teacher and healer who was the most influential person who ever lived, whom we call Lord.

Why? Because Jesus is such a mystery to us, and we would like to know more about him, and know it in a more tangible and real way.

Sure, we’ve read what the New Testament says about Jesus; and we know what the church and the Christian faith believes about him. But let’s face it, we don’t really know him. Not with absolute certainty, anyway. Most of what we know and believe about Jesus, we have to accept on faith.

Of course, if we did have a magical time machine and were able to travel back to first century Palestine and see Jesus in the flesh; if we could observe Jesus teaching in the synagogues, healing the sick and feeding five thousand people with a few loaves of bread and a couple of fish; if we were up on that high mountain when Jesus was transfigured and his face shone like the sun and his clothes became dazzling white, would we really know any more about him than we do right now?

And would we have any better, stronger reason to believe in Jesus than

we do right now?

Keep in mind that most of the individuals who lived in Jesus' day and saw him face to face never actually followed him or particularly appreciated him. Even his disciples abandoned him at one point. Sure, large crowds came to hear him, but that was mostly out of curiosity or, perhaps, because they wanted to be healed or wanted Jesus to heal a loved one of theirs.

Yes, a lot of people encountered and saw Jesus, and maybe even got to know him a little, but most of those people did so for their own benefit. Jesus' genuine supporters—those eyewitnesses who were willing to actually take up their crosses and follow him—were few and far between.

So, I personally don't think it makes a whole lot of difference whether our encounters with Jesus were in person 2000 years ago, or are basically spiritual in nature in 2017, because either way, Jesus is still a mysterious and enigmatic character, and in both cases our choice is exactly the same.

Will we believe in him or not? Despite the mystery that exists, and everything we don't know and aren't sure about regarding Jesus, will we take up our crosses and follow him? And just like the eyewitnesses who encountered Jesus in person back then, we who encounter Jesus in the spirit today have to make the same decision they did, to either believe in and follow him or not, based almost entirely on faith. And we have to choose to believe in and follow Jesus even when the evidence we have to go on regarding his identity as the Messiah isn't totally clear or is mostly circumstantial.

We have to choose to believe in Jesus despite the mystery that surrounds him and the two thousand year gap of time that exists between his life and ours. Our belief in Jesus is based not so much on knowing, but in trusting. What we believe about Jesus is mostly grounded in religious faith rather than historical fact.

Of course, some people today have had what can be called "mountaintop experiences," where the presence of the Lord became known to them in such a real and tangible way that it was as if the Lord was standing right there in front of them in the flesh.

God bless those who've had such amazing, possibly life-changing experiences, but they're definitely in the minority. They are the rare, privileged individuals who've had a powerful encounter with Christ that knocked them for a loop, blew their circuits, and perhaps transformed everything they thought they knew and believed and understood. For them, the veil between heaven and earth was, for a brief time, parted, and the Lord allowed them to catch a glimpse of heavenly glory that others can't even imagine.

But for the vast majority of us, our faith experiences fall more within the

bounds of ordinary, everyday life. Most of us are going to have to be satisfied with seeing Christ's presence and glory through eyes of faith, in average, commonplace things and events.

Most of us have to make an effort and work a little bit—or maybe even a lot—to perceive Jesus in the midst of the familiar, run-of-the-mill occurrences and circumstances of human existence. Most of us will have to accept that the humanly-impossible-to-fathom mystery of Jesus' glory, and the puzzling enigma of Jesus' identity as both a real human being and the true Son of God, will have to remain a mystery to us—at least for right now.

That's what the cloud epitomizes in Matthew's story of Christ's transfiguration: it signifies the mystery and incomprehensibility of a Messiah who is real and is here in our midst, but who at the same time remains hidden from our direct view.

And that's what the brightly shining, blazingly-white, gloriously transfigured Jesus on the mountain represents: the unfathomable, astonishing and profound true identity of a man who is both fully human and fully divine

There's a novel from some years back called *Lying Awake* by Mark Salzman. It tells the story of a contemporary nun in the Roman Catholic Church who dedicated her life to prayer and contemplation. But, in spite of her vows and best intentions, she never enjoyed those times of prayer and worship in her community. At best, it was drudgery for her. It never met her personal spiritual needs, and never gave her any particular joy, comfort or consolation in life. It just wasn't fulfilling to her.

But then suddenly, after a couple of decades of this dry and desolate worship, the nun began having amazing and euphoric experiences of God's presence and glory. What she experienced was so beautiful that it inspired her to write incredible and highly acclaimed spiritual poetry, which also attracted other women to be nuns. Her poetry made her world famous, and she was invited to Rome, to the Vatican, to read some of her poetry at a special service in celebration of Saint Teresa of Avila, the great contemplative nun and mystic.

Eventually, after a medical examination, the nun was told by her doctor that she was suffering from a rare form of epilepsy. She learned that she was having those euphoric spiritual experiences because of her illness.

"Epilepsy caused them?" the nun thought. She was astonished beyond belief. The glorious visions of the divine had seemed so genuine, so real. Surely they couldn't be the result of a dysfunctional brain.

But then the nun asked herself, even if they were caused by epilepsy, did that make her heavenly visions any less real?

I think that's an important question to ponder. Because, you see, in the

Gospel passage we read this morning, the cloud on the mountain could have been nothing more than a natural meteorological event. And Jesus' glorious transfiguration on the mountain may have been the result of a sudden, brilliant shaft of sunlight striking him and highlighting his appearance to Peter, Andrew, James and John. And it's possible that God's voice could have spoken to the disciples through an unexpected rumble of thunder or a sudden, reverberating gust of wind. After all, God often reveals God's self and speaks to us through normal, ordinary happenings and events, and it doesn't make those divine manifestations and voices any less real. Or at least it shouldn't.

In a sermon on Jesus' transfiguration entitled, *The Bright Cloud of Unknowing*, the Rev. Barbara Brown Taylor wrote, "Once you emerge from the cloud [of a divine experience], you are supposed to be surer than ever about what you believe. You are supposed to know who's who, what's what, where you are going in your life and why. You are supposed to have answers to all the important questions, and when you read the Bible you are supposed to know what it means. You have been given your Christian decoder ring, now use it!

"But what if the goal is not to decode the cloud [of a sacred experience] but to enter into it? What if the whole Bible is less a book of divine certainties than it is a book of divine encounters, in which a staggeringly long parade of people run into God, into each other, into life—and are never the same again?"

Barbara Brown Taylor went on to write, ". . . such biblical encounters . . . had a way of breaking biblical characters open, of rearranging what they thought they knew for sure so that there was room for more divine movement in their lives. Sometimes the movement involved traveling from one place to another. Sometimes it meant changing their [understanding] of what was true and why. And sometimes it involved the almost invisible movement of one heart toward another."

I like that last sentence. "Sometimes [divine movement] involves the almost invisible movement of one heart toward another." I think Barbara Brown Taylor is referring to Christian love right there. I think she's talking about loving one's neighbor as oneself. I think she's talking about doing ministry, because, you see, Christian ministry is what we do for one another after our hearts move toward one another. And that ministry starts after we enter into the mystery of a divine encounter with God.

So, we go up on the mountain, however we understand that, to experience the Lord's mysterious, glorious divine presence and have the truth about Jesus' identity as the Son of God revealed to us; and then we come down from the mountain and use the newly received spiritual strength and enthusiasm that came from our divine encounter to love and minister to others.

Is there any better reason for having divine visions and experiencing heavenly splendor than to utilize those awesome events to fulfil the great commandment Jesus gave us, to love God with all our being and to love our neighbors as ourselves?

If we had a time machine and could travel back to the time of Jesus; and if we could have been on that mountaintop with Peter and Andrew and James and John to witness Jesus' transfiguration, perhaps we would have had an amazing mountaintop experience that would have blown our minds and transformed our lives.

But my question to you this morning is, why couldn't this worship service be for us a similar experience of the awesome presence of God in our midst? Is it so hard to believe that, right now, as we listen to God's Word spoken and hear it expounded upon, and as we sing sacred hymns together and pray together and fellowship together and love one another as Jesus commanded, is it so hard to believe that the Lord can use those things to allow us to experience a vision of Jesus in transfigured splendor, and come to see him and listen to him as God's beloved Son?

This morning's worship service is our chance to climb the mountain with the Lord today, to enter the cloud of divine mystery, see the exalted Christ, and listen for whatever it is that God has to say for us. This moment, right here and right now, is our chance to catch a glimpse of transfigured Christ in all his splendor and glory, and allow that splendor and glory to deepen our faith and transform our lives.

And when we come as close as we dare to the presence of Jesus, the Holy One of God, see him for who he really is, place our trust in his identity as God's beloved, and listen to him as God commands, we will experience the same kind of mysterious mountaintop event that Peter, Andrew, James and John did; and we will leave this sanctuary trusting that whatever ministry Jesus calls us to do, and however difficult it may be, our Lord will be right there with us to help us accomplish it. Thanks be to God. Amen.