

CHRIST'S GLORY REVEALED

I find it interesting. Maybe even a little odd. To have a glorious, surreal, holy vision like Peter, James and John did, and then be told to keep it to themselves. “Don’t tell anyone what you have seen,” Jesus warned the three of them, “until the Son of Man has been raised from the dead.”

We sometimes read about people who’ve had encounters with flying saucers. Some of them even claim that they were abducted by extraterrestrial beings, taken into their space craft, and unceremoniously prodded, probed and examined. Then they were let go. I’m sure some of those alleged abductees kept their “close encounter of the third kind” secret. They didn’t want to share it with anyone, probably because they feared that people would think they were making it up. They were lying. They were looking for attention. Or even worse, the people they tell would think they were just plain cuckoo.

Maybe it was as simple as that. Maybe Jesus was trying to protect Peter, James and John from the ridicule and mockery they would experience if they shared their mountaintop experience with others.

If you were on that mountaintop with Peter, James and John and saw a vision of a gloriously transfigured Jesus, would you share it with the world? Would go on the local news or CNN, stand before the cameras and tell what you saw? And if you did make public what you experienced on that mountain, what do you think the reaction would be? What would people say? Do you think their first reaction be one of positive excitement? Do you think they would believe you? Would they immediately accept what you said as the truth?

Or would the response to your story be more along the lines of, “Jesus did what? He shone like the sun? His clothes became as white as the light? And the great lawgiver Moses and prophet Elijah were there too, conversing with Jesus? You’re making it up. You’re lying. You don’t really expect me to believe that, do you?”

Or maybe they would express cynicism. “Yeah, right. You just want to write a book and make a ton of money from it, don’t you?” Or perhaps they would question your sanity. “You can’t be serious? That’s the most ridiculous thing I’ve ever heard! You’re insane. You need to check yourself into the Psychiatric Ward.”

Of course, the first person you might have to convince that what you witnessed was genuine and did truly happen would be—yourself! You would have to believe your own eyes that such an incredible vision was genuine; that the shining light wasn't just the sun's reflection. You would have to trust your hearing that the heavenly voice that spoke to you from a cloud wasn't actually the rumbling of thunder.

I remember when I was a pastor up in East Millinocket over thirty years ago, I was visiting a parishioner in the hospital. There was a nurse who worked there named Hope—she was born in Northern Maine but had moved to Nashville, Tennessee for a number of years. When Hope returned to East Millinocket to live, she brought back with her a Southern drawl and a fiancé. I officiated at their wedding.

Hope got a job as a nurse at the Millinocket regional Hospital and started attending my church on occasion. On this particular day when I was visiting at the hospital, Hope saw me and came running up to me. “A co-worker has a picture you just have to see. It's a picture of Jesus.”

“Uh-huh,” I thought. “Sure it is.”

So we found this nurse co-worker in the hallway and Hope said, “Show Fred your picture of Jesus.” We went into an empty room and she pulled out this picture. I let out an audible gasp. It was a picture of Jesus. It looked like he had just come down from the cross. He was standing, looking at the camera, his arms outstretched, his body covered in blood. And I mean covered. He wore a crown of thorns, and blood was running down over his face. His expression was somber, but it was also peaceful and calm.

“Is this for real?” I asked the woman who had the picture.

“Yes,” she said. “There was no one there when I took that picture, and when I had it developed, that's what was on it.”

I didn't know what to think. She seemed serious and sincere that this picture really was Jesus. But I couldn't wrap my logical mind around it. I wanted to believe her and believe her seemingly miraculous photograph was genuine, but I can't say I did.

I had forgotten about that incident for many years—until it came into my mind when preparing this sermon. And even now, thinking back on it, I still don't know what to make of that picture. I wish I could believe it was real, because it would greatly reinforce my faith. But I have significant doubts.

Can you blame me?

The point is, if I was up on that mountaintop and my eyes had seen the transfiguration of Jesus, and my ears had heard the voice coming out of that

cloud saying, “This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased. Listen to him!” I’m not sure what I would think or how I would react.

And I can’t say for sure whether I would believe it really happened. I’d like to think I would believe, but as one man said to Jesus when he asked the Lord to heal his son and Jesus told him to have faith, “Lord, I believe. Help my unbelief.”

We don’t know, and can’t know, exactly what happened on the Mountain of Transfiguration. The story says Jesus shined with a radiant light. There were visions of great, long-dead leaders from the past. There was voice from heaven affirming Jesus’ status as the Christ, the One whom God sent to redeem the world.

None of those things the story says happened are provable. But if we get caught up wondering and worrying about the provability of what Matthew wrote, we risk totally missing the point of why he wrote it. The goal, you see, isn’t for us to uncover the story behind the story, or to make enough sense of it that it can fit comfortably into our reality. Rather, the goal is to try to discern, to discover what Word God has for us here. The question for us to ask isn’t, “Is this story literally true?” but, “What is God trying to tell us through this story?”

What the story of Jesus’ transfiguration is doing is offering us a glimpse of Christ the Messiah in all his magnificence, as the Son of God whom God sent to offer forgiveness of sins, and whose resurrection conquered death and made the gift of Eternal Life available to the world. But the transfiguration of Christ only makes sense when it’s seen through the prism of Easter and the empty tomb. And that’s why I think Jesus told Peter, James and John not to say anything about what they saw on that mountain to anyone. Because it couldn’t be fully understood until after his resurrection.

The story of Jesus being transfigured on the mountain is a strange story. And I can tell you from first-hand experience, it’s a bear to preach on. Every time this reading comes along in the lectionary I think to myself, “What can I say about it that’s relevant? How can I make sense of it for myself so that I can help you make sense of it?” The thing is, I’m not sure the transfiguration story is supposed to make sense. I think this story is simply supposed to direct us toward the mystery of Christ’s identity, and allow us to get a tiny preview of Christ’s glory—a glory that one day, in God’s good time, will be made known to us, and to the whole world.

Until then, all we can do is listen to the story, and ponder it, and embrace the wonder of it. And we can open ourselves to experience the transfiguration event in our own ways, today.

How about those moments when you’re so touched by a choral anthem

or a sermon or a prayer that Christ's glory is revealed to us? And those times during Holy Communion when the Spirit of Christ reaches out and touches you, and you know without question that Jesus is present in a wondrous and inescapable way. And what about during the birth of a child? Or at a baptism, when an individual is made a member of Christ's church? Or even at the moment of a loved one's death, when your grief is overwhelming and you can't stop the tears from flowing, but at the same time you sense the holy presence of Christ in such a powerful way, you know that somehow, you will make it through the pain of your loss. Those are all transfiguration moments, when we experience Jesus' glory just as powerfully as Peter, James and John experienced it.

Whatever actually did happen on that mountaintop and has come to be known as the transfiguration of Jesus; and however little we understand it, we can trust that it speaks an eternal truth about who Jesus is. And it grants us a glimpse of the divine glory that was hidden within his human flesh, but will one day, in God's good time, be fully revealed to the whole world. And that's enough knowledge, don't you think, for us to take seriously the words God spoke from the cloud. "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased. Listen to him!" Amen.