

## **SIX MEN ON A MOUNTAIN**

A sermon preached by the Rev. Dr. Nadene Grieve-Deslippe on March 6, 2011  
**Crossroads United Church**

**Exodus 24:12-18**

**Matthew :17: 1-9**

When I was the minister at Faith United, here in Kingston, for a time I was privileged to have an organist who was theologically trained and had a Ph. D in religious studies from Harvard University. He had also served as the principal of the Theological College at Queen's for two terms and when he stepped down from that position, and, had more time on his hands, he agreed to take on the responsibilities of music director at our small church community. It was rather daunting for me initially because I had taken a couple courses from him while I was a student at Queen's and had not gotten first class honours. I was a little intimidated by his intellect, but over time, I began to see him with new eyes. He was a gifted scholar with a passion for eastern mysticism and Hinduism, and a brilliant and passionate musician. But he was also a man of faith who had a love and appreciation for the scriptures and teaching of our Christian tradition. In a conversation we had over lunch one day, as we were better getting to know one another, I discovered that he did still like to preach, but did not get many opportunities to do so.

In that conversation I shared that there were two Sunday's that I struggled with in particular in the liturgical year: Transfiguration and Trinity Sunday. I find both mysterious and difficult to make sense of in the limitations of a brief Sunday morning homily. He responded that he loved to preach the Transfiguration, precisely because it was a mystery. I asked him then and there if he wanted the opportunity on the ensuing Sunday before Lent to preach on the Transfiguration, and he accepted without reservation.

I don't remember all that he had to say in that sermon, but I do remember his passion and the excitement that he brought to it. I recall him being particularly curious about the significance of the booths in the story-a reference that continues to engage and intrigue Matthean scholars. He invited us to embrace the mystery-even if we did not

completely understand all that it might mean. It was a moment in time that became transformational for me, and somewhat of a transfiguration of my former professor. I witnessed an introverted intellectual with a passion for and knowledge of Hinduism become a passionate preacher and a faithful companion on a journey of faith and discovery with our sacred text as figurative map and compass. I learned to risk seeing with new eyes and straining to hear with new ears. I began to appreciate that I could embrace the mysteries of the faith- incarnational theology and the will of God and God's plan for Creation and Jesus' role in that unfolding plan - even if I did not completely understand the mystery. I think, that as I sat and listened to a former professor preach on a challenging text, I began to understand the mystery of faith in its "here I stand I can do no other" incarnation.

I do not pretend to completely understand the Transfiguration but I am awed by its mystery. Even after preaching it on the Sunday before Lent for most of my thirty years in ministry I am not much closer to unravelling the fullness of its mystery, but I embrace the mystery as an opportunity. I still have some questions about why it was that only Peter, James and John were privileged to have the experience; what does it mean that Jesus was flanked by Moses and Elijah, the two biblical personalities most closely associated with the law and the prophets; what is the significance of Peter's reference to the booths and why were the three former fishermen given this awesome experience and then told to remain mute about it? I do believe that it about empowerment. God, the law and the prophets empowering the Christological figure to embrace the suffering that lay ahead. Jesus then empowering his elite disciples with an experience that would encourage them to carry on in the journey with him, and perhaps more significantly, after his death, resurrection and ascension. Penultimately, we as modern day followers are being similarly empowered to begin the pilgrimage again to Calvary that will begin on Wednesday, and be experienced in earnest during holy week.

Perhaps the Transfiguration continues to be an invitation for us to look upon theology and faith with new eyes; to ponder it in the fullness of mystery; to see the story in all of its fullness: the agony and the ecstasy, the empowerment and the vulnerability;

the glory and the suffering. Like Peter, we too may bring an all too human understanding to the moment. When he peers upon his heroes of the faith in Elijah and Moses he immediately wants to set to work doing something to preserve the moment. My study Bible footnotes that what has been translated as booths may refer to a tent or dwelling. I have heard others refer to it as a cairn- a stone monument that marks the spot of something significant. Regardless of what he actually said, I do think that Matthew is depicting a very human response from a man in the company of holy mystery. And this may just encapsulate for us some of the difficulty that we too have with this text when we bring our all too practical and human limitations to the experience.

The passage is highly theological. Some scholars suggest that the reference to the booths recalls the Jewish Festival of Booths, a major festival in which participants lived in tents commemorating the sojourn in the desert, when a shining cloud was the presence of God- their protector and guide- and they had in their midst the Ark containing the tablets that had been given to Moses. For Peter to exclaim that it was good to be in that place at that time was a bit of an understatement. He is seeing in the shining transfigured face of Christ and the presence of Elijah and Moses a succinct rendering of the Judeo Christian history: the journey through the wilderness, the entrance into the Promised Land, the rituals of the Temple and the shining presence of God in Christ. It is all coming together: the word of God in the law, the word of God in the prophets and the Word made flesh in Jesus: hence three dwellings.

Peter has hardly finished speaking when the three heroes are enveloped in a cloud and a voice speaks. The cloud of presence is symbolic that the law, prophets and Beloved Son have come together in the Beloved Son. As the light of God's presence once lead the sojourners through the wilderness, now it is the light of Christ recognized in the resurrection that will bring Israel into the light of God's presence. Jesus must endure suffering and death and be resurrected, and in the light of post resurrection faith Peter, James and John and others will understand. The command to listen may be a kind of challenge to those who were closest to Jesus. Listen to him and you will hear that he is the embodiment of the law. Listen to him and you will hear that he is the

fulfilment of prophetic promise. Listen to him and you will experience the word of God in flesh incarnate.

The experience was so awesome, wondrous and frightening that the witnesses are driven to their knees in fear and awe. They cower there, afraid it would seem, to even look up. So Jesus walks over to them, touches them gently and encourages them to rise up unafraid. As they make their descent Jesus tells them to keep the experience to themselves for the time being.

It is an awesome text. Though I have had a love hate relationship with its subtleties and complexities for thirty years, this year as I have revisited it through the eyes and pen of Matthew, it has merged into an amalgam of the sensual, experiential and mystical. Peter, James and John see with their eyes, Jesus transfigured and then observe the appearance of Elijah and Moses. They hear the voice of God and it drives them to their knees. And then they encounter the gentle touch of their master and Lord, infusing them with calm, courage and conviction and they are empowered and enabled to make their descent. The experience had to contain elements of the transformational for Peter, James and John that placed an indelible mark upon their memories, hearts and souls. And this is where the empowerment of the mysterious and the sacredness of the God-given sensual can complement one another in deepening our faith.

Perhaps many of us have been privileged to stand on holy ground. It may have been a spiritual high at an event or a retreat. It might have included visiting a spiritual place of pilgrimage. For many visiting the Iona community or the Vatican, or visiting the Holy Land where one has an encounter with the mystery of God. I have not yet walked where Jesus walked in Jerusalem, Galilee and Nazareth but I have had the sense of feeling the touch of the master in places as I live my life and exercise my ministry. I was having dinner with one of my daughters when I was summoned to the hospital. I took her with me to save time, and gave her the option of waiting in the family room if she was not comfortable coming into the sick room. I was reasonably sure that it would be fine with that particular family were she to choose the latter.

I got permission for her to enter and she opted to do that. A beloved partner gave up his seat so that she might sit down. I held the hand of the person in the bed and we chatted about the normalcy of my life, even as we all were very aware that the life in this one was ebbing. After a visit, some laughing and kibitzing I asked if I could say a prayer. I was not sure of the comfort level in the beloved or in my daughter, but all instinctively put our hands so that we might make a circle of love and communion. I said a prayer, and gave a kiss and said good bye. It was the last time that I would see that person.

My daughter wept as we made our way home-breaking the silence only to apologize for her tears. I kept reassuring her that tears were fine; that for as hard as it sometimes is for me to let go of the hands and lives of those that I have held in Christ's name that it was such a privilege just the same. Finally she said, "I am not crying about sickness and death. They love one another so much."

Her eyes had seen the mystery. She was transformed by the power of love in strangers who were now her friends. She wept not in sadness but in awe of the power of grace; was transformed by the gift of eternal and transcendent love that cannot be destroyed in the ebbing of breath, and was touched by God in the experience. She did not see a transfiguration but she saw how faith can calm ones fears, and empower another to let go, all the while comprehending that some ties can never be severed. It was a glimpse of eternity in a hospital room. She may not speak of it again, but I shall not soon forget. Sometimes seeing is believing.

It may not make complete sense in the moment. Like those men on the mountain we may need to filter so many things through faith in the resurrection, but things sensual and the things of mystery can still empower us to make our way from the experience on the mountaintop to the agony of suffering and the ecstasy of new life.

Whatever else he said that day, my former professor invited me to embrace the unexplainable; to find a comfort zone in the realm of mystery and to worry less about completely unravelling the phenomenon. It is sufficient to see, and hear and be touched and empowered.