

Squamish United Church
Rev. Karen Millard
Transfiguration

March 2, 2014

Scripture Reading:
Mark 5:38-48

Wonderlight

I love this story of our faith. Not because I understand it but more so because it is incomprehensible. I love it because it reminds me that we have a God of amazing mystery, a God that cannot be put into a box that fits our understanding and criteria. We have a God that calls us to wonder and amazement. As I say this I recognize even labelling God with one name is stifling. Love, energy, force, omnipotence, mystery...you pick the titles that fit in your holy experience.

As people of faith, as theologians and ministers we can get caught up in the exegeses and interpretations of every word in the biblical text and I am pretty sure more often than not, that is not what we are to do with the story. Barbara Brown Taylor writes "The story that we have just heard defies interpretation, although that has not stopped legions of interpreters from trying. It is the luminous story of a mystical encounter, not only between God and God's Beloved but also between those at the center of the story and those who watch. Those at the center are Jesus, Moses and Elijah. Those who watch are Peter, James and John. And then, of course, there are all of us watching all of them, most of us laboring under the illusion that our job is to figure out what the story means.

I am not sure where we got this idea, but it seems to dominate the way that many of us read the Bible. Give us a passage of scripture and we will put on our thinking caps, doing our best to decipher the symbols, read between the lines and come up with the encoded message that Jesus or Luke or God has hidden in the passage for us to find. The idea seems to be that the story itself is chiefly a suitcase for conveying the meaning inside of it. Discern the content of the story and you do not have to go rummaging around inside of it every time it comes up. Instead, you can pull the meaning out of it and place it neatly folded in a drawer where you can find it the next time you need it."¹

Abraham Heschel wrote "Our goal should be to live life in radical amazement.get up in the morning and look at the world in a way that takes nothing for granted. Everything is phenomenal; everything is incredible; never treat life casually. To be spiritual is to be amazed." And I believe this is what this scripture calls us too. Our faith should tune us to wonder and draw us to awe.

BB Taylor continues, this passage "starts with a long climb up a windy mountain in the fading light of day, hunting for a strong place to pray. No talking for once. No wall of words between

¹http://day1.org/5560-the_bright_cloud_of_unknowing

you and the others. Just breathing for once, just hearing them breathe, until you can't tell whether you are breathing or being breathed. Are you hyperventilating?

Sit down. You are here to pray, so get on with it. Pray until you are weighed down with sleep. Pray until it is dark enough to see light through your eyelids where light should not be. You don't really want to open your eyes to see where the light is coming from. But you kind of do. But you don't. Then you look.

And there he is: someone you thought you knew really well, standing there pulsing with light, leaking light everywhere. Face like a flame. Clothes dazzling white. Then, as if that weren't enough, two other people are there with him, all of them standing in that same bright light. Who are they? Can't be. Moses. Elijah. Dead men come back to life. God's own glory, lighting up the night. Now they're leaving. Now Peter's saying something.”

Peter, like always, seems to get it wrong. He wants to build some tents and stay in this moment, but the moment's gone. Peter is cut off by a cloud asking us to listen to Jesus, The beloved son. But Jesus isn't even speaking in this moment, he's just shining. And now that moment is gone too, and it's just us, regular, ordinary us. What are we supposed to do with this experience?

It probably didn't take much convincing when Jesus told the disciples to keep this story to themselves. After-all, that is what most of us do when we encounter the supernatural wonder power and light. When we encounter something we don't understand or can't control, outside of our realm. We have enough trouble admitting it to ourselves let alone anyone else. If you were to tell your friends a story like this they might question your sanity.

“Most of us are allowed at least one direct experience of God (within bounds)--something that knocks us for a loop, blows our circuits, calls all our old certainties into question. Some churches even require you to produce one as proof of your conversion. But even in congregations that welcome signs and wonders on a regular basis, there seems to be a general consensus that life in Christ means trading in your old certainties for new ones.”² And I'm not sure that is very scriptural, faith-like, or the Jesus way.

It seems that some might argue, if you have had a true faith experience then “Once you emerge from the cloud, you are supposed to be surer than ever 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.... “

But I don't think decoding is the point. Rather I believe we are to enter into the wonder and amazement of the story. The things of God and Jesus should always amaze us. If Jesus is the presence of God, and God is well pleased with Jesus because he lives a different way, a wondrous, amazing way.

² http://day1.org/5560-the_bright_cloud_of_unknowing

Taylor writes “What if the whole Bible is less a book of certainties than it is a book of encounters, in which a staggeringly long parade of people run into God, each other, life--and are never the same again? I mean, what don't people run into in the Bible? Not just terrifying clouds and hair-raising voices but also crazy relatives, persistent infertility, armed enemies, and deep depression, along with life-saving strangers, miraculous children, food in the wilderness, and knee-wobbling love.

Whether such biblical encounters come disguised as "good" or "bad," they have a way of breaking biblical people open, of rearranging what they think they know for sure so that there is room for more divine movement in their lives. Sometimes the movement involves traveling from one place to another. Sometimes it means changing their angle on what is true and why. Sometimes it involves the almost invisible movement of one heart toward another.

Certainties can become casualties in these encounters, or at least those certainties that involve clinging to static notions of who's who and what's what, where you are going in your life and why. Those things can shift pretty dramatically inside the cloud of unknowing, where faith has more to do with staying fully present to what is happening right in front of you than with being certain of what it all means.”

Some of you might realize that this is the final Sunday of Epiphany. We are about to move into the season of Lent.

“it is time to turn away from the twinkling stars of Christmas toward the deep wilderness of Lent. As gloomy as that may sound, it is very good news. Most of us are so distracted by our gadgets, so busy with our work, so addicted to our pleasures, and so resistant to our depths that a nice long spell in the wilderness is just what we need.

No one can make you go, after all. But if you've been looking for some excuse to head to your own mountaintop and pray, this is it. If you've been looking for some way to trade in your old certainties for new movement in your life, look no further. This is your chance to enter the cloud of unknowing and listen for whatever it is that God has to say to you... this is your chance to encounter God's contagious glory, so that a little of that shining rubs off on you.

Today you have heard a story you can take with you when you go. It tells you that no one has to go up the mountain alone. It tells you that sometimes things get really scary before they get holy. Above all, it tells you that there is someone standing in the center of the cloud with you, shining so brightly that you may never be able to wrap your mind around him, but who is worth listening to all the same--because he is God's beloved, and you are his, and whatever comes next, you are up to it.”³

If I had time I would have shared one of my favourite songs with you at this point but instead I'll offer it to you as a bit of a prayer as you enter into these next days.

³ http://day1.org/5560-the_bright_cloud_of_unknowing

I hope you never lose your sense of wonder
You get your fill to eat but always keep that hunger
May you never take one single breath for granted
God forbid love ever leave you empty handed
I hope you still feel small when you stand beside the ocean
Whenever one door closes I hope one more opens
Promise me that you'll give faith a fighting chance
And when you get the choice to sit it out or dance

I hope you dance

The next 40 days are about the wonder and amazement of Jesus. Let's go into it with expectant hope, prodding hope, longing to be surprised and awed by the Jesus way. And remember "Our goal should be to live life in radical amazement.get up in the morning and look at the world in a way that takes nothing for granted. Everything is phenomenal; everything is incredible; never treat life casually. To be spiritual is to be amazed."

May it be so.

Amen.