

Exodus 24:9-18 and 34:29-35

Luke 9:28-36

February 26, 2017, Transfiguration Sunday

Preached by Philip Gladden at the Wallace Presbyterian Church, Wallace, NC

LOST IN WONDER, LOVE, AND PRAISE

Let us pray: Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

When I enrolled at Union Presbyterian Seminary in Richmond, Virginia and began taking Bible courses, I was introduced to what is called the “historical-critical method” of biblical study. Historical criticism is just one method of studying the ancient texts of the Old and New Testaments. The historical-critical method investigates the origins of ancient writings to understand the backgrounds and settings of Bible stories.

Although I wasn’t a religion major in college, I did take several introductory Bible courses, such as Into to Old and New Testament, Hebrew prophets, and the life and sayings of Jesus. However, in college I didn’t learn all of the tools needed to apply the historical-critical method of biblical study to the biblical texts.

At Union Seminary at the end of the 1970’s and in the early 1980’s, the historical-critical method was **the** method we learned. For some professors, it was the **only** acceptable method of studying the ancient texts of the Bible. One of our New Testament professors (who happened to end up being on my doctoral dissertation committee), taught us that each Bible story had only one point and one correct outline. Of course, **he** knew what those were — we had to figure it out and hope we came up with what he had in mind! That was always a challenge, and most of us didn’t always get it right! Consequently, between my first stint in seminary and my graduate work in New Testament studies, I am well trained in using the tools of the historical-critical method — and I love doing it!

However, in the last few months, God has been working on my heart about how I read and interpret scripture. I will never abandon the historical-critical method in my sermon preparation — it’s too much fun and much too valuable to jettison. But, more and more I’m being drawn to a more contemplative reading of God’s Word, not just for personal devotional use but especially for teaching and proclaiming God’s Word.

A good friend and colleague, Dr. Bob Bryant, is a member of the Religion and Philosophy Department at Presbyterian College in Clinton, SC. When I talked with Bob earlier this month about my growing interest in reading and interpreting scripture in a more contemplative way, he recommended a relatively new book by William Brown, who teaches Old Testament at Columbia Presbyterian Theological Seminary in Decatur, Georgia. The book is called *Sacred Sense: Discovering the Wonder of God’s Word and World*.

In his preface, Dr. Brown, who is a renowned biblical scholar, says, “This may very well be the hardest book I’ve ever written.” He describes his areas of expertise as

an Old Testament scholar, including “the study of ancient history, ancient artifacts, ancient texts, and ancient languages.” However, as steeped as he is in “ancient things,” Dr. Brown says, “I have no desire simply to blow dust off of relics. Instead, I have sought to bring the ancient Scriptures to life and through them to point the reader toward new imaginings, new ways of reading biblical texts, even those texts that remain ‘dead and buried’ in their suffocating familiarity.”

Dr. Brown is speaking to my soul! And I hope what he says will spark something in you as you read and hear God’s Word in these ancient texts. His introduction is called “Wonder’s Wonder,” and in it he says, “perhaps wonder also lies at the heart of biblical faith.” He describes “reading Scripture with an eye for wonder,” and says, “Reading with wonder is reading not for information (how do you do that with love poetry?) or even for answers to urgent questions. It is not a means toward a specific end, not with some useful purpose in mind. It is the kind of reading that lingers . . . It is reading with readiness for surprise and in the process raising ‘wonderings’ — questions and ponderings that stir the imagination and generate thinking. . . Reading with wonder is responding with wonder. It is marveling at the open mystery to which the text points.”¹

The story of Jesus being transfigured on the mountain is one of the best Bible stories to cause us to marvel “at the open mystery to which the text points.” This week I discovered a comic strip called “Agnus Day,” which is a play on the Latin words, “Agnus Dei, which mean “Lamb of God.” Agnus Day is written and drawn by a Lutheran campus minister named James Wetzstein. The cartoon is based on the weekly lectionary readings, the Bible passages that are suggested for preachers to consider for sermons. The two main characters in the strip are two sheep named Rick and Ted. Each week they discuss one of the assigned readings from the lectionary.

In the cartoon about Luke’s story about Jesus, Moses, Elijah, Peter, James, and John up on the mountain, Ted asks Rick (remember, these are two sheep talking!), “Why are they afraid of a little fog?” Rick answers, “In Exodus, the cloud on the mountain signals an encounter with God. That’s *always* frightening.” In the last panel, Ted says, “Jesus is talking with two *dead guys* and his head has become a *light source*. How much *weirder* can it *get*?”

Ted’s got a good point — how much weirder can it get than a story about Jesus’ face changing, his clothes flashing white like lightning, Moses and Elijah appearing next to him on the mountain, a cloud overshadowing all of them, and a heavenly voice declaring, “This is my Son, the Chosen One. Listen to him”? I don’t care what kind of mountaintop experiences you have had in your life and faith — as marvelous and as shaping and as memorable as they may have been, I doubt they come close to this “wonder-full” mountaintop story.

The historical-critical method can supply lots of interesting and helpful information about this story of Jesus’ transfiguration. But, this morning, what if we just marvel at the open mystery to which Luke’s story points?

Here’s a poem/prayer that might help us do just that:

*We want to know you, Jesus.
We want to cherish and hold, adore and revere, esteem and glorify you.
Keep you in our hearts, glimpse you in our lives, trace you on our paths.
Comforting the homeless, grieving with the mourners, forgiving our sins, heal-
ing our wounds, raising our dying.
We are afraid, awed, overwhelmed at your glory.
We are touched, moved, transformed by your love.
We are cleansed, renewed, refreshed by your forgiveness.
We thank you. We praise you. We love you.
You . . . the transfigured One. You . . . the resurrected One.
You . . . the One . . .
“This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him.” Amen.²*

Today, on the eve of the season of Lent, we catch a glimpse of the majesty and mystery and glory of God revealed in his beloved and chosen Son, Jesus. It’s a good thing we can stand on the mountain with Peter, James, and John and be privy to this vision of the transfiguration, because in a few days, we will begin our “Journey to the Cross” through Lent 2017.

Just before Jesus goes up on the mountain to pray with three of his disciples, he tells them (again) how he must go to Jerusalem to suffer and die. Shortly after they come down from the mountain, Jesus sets his face to go to Jerusalem because the days are drawing near for him to be taken up. There on the mountaintop, Moses and Elijah talk with Jesus about his departure, his **exodus**, his coming death. Just as God delivered his people in the exodus from their slavery to Pharaoh, so Jesus delivered God’s people in his exodus from our slavery to sin. Wonder of wonders, though, Jesus’ exodus, Jesus’ departure leads straight to and straight through the cross on Calvary. We’ll probably sing about it during Lent: “What wondrous love is this, O my soul, O my soul, what wondrous love is this, O my soul! What wondrous love is this that caused the Lord of bliss to bear the dreadful curse for my soul, for my soul, to bear the dreadful curse for my soul!”

Here we are, in the presence of God Almighty in worship, catching a glimpse of Jesus’ full glory as his face is changed and his clothing becomes white as lightning and we hear, again, the heavenly voice affirm, “This is my Son the Beloved!” That is the experience we carry with us into Lent, as we contemplate for the next six weeks what Jesus Christ did for us on the cross.

I’m not going to try to explain the transfiguration of Jesus on the mountain, because I don’t think I can. However, I do invite you to stand with me today in the presence of the God of glory and take seriously God’s call to us to listen to his Son, to obey his Son, to follow his Son where he leads us.

From time to time, I read a blog by an Episcopal priest named Rick Morley. A few years ago, Rev. Morley wrote about Luke’s story of the transfiguration and called it “in the cloud . . .” Here’s a bit of what he wrote:

“When the cloud descends atop the mountaintop with Jesus, Peter, John and James...we shouldn't be left surprised at what's happening. The Presence of God is enveloping them, as the Presence of God has done time and time again to God's faithful people. God's Presence manifest as a cloud says something about God. Because, clouds don't bring *more* clarity, they obscure. They hide. And, in this sense they remind us of the mystery of God.

“In our world we want to know things. We want Google always at our fingertips to tell us everything about anything, and we want Facebook to instantly tell us everything else—like what our friends had for dinner and how mom's cruise is going. As humans we've always had a hunger and thirst for knowledge—well ever since Eden that is. And, as technology has advanced through the millennia, we want more and more knowledge within our grasp at all times.

“And, for faithful Christians that's no different with our relationship to God. We want to know things about God. We want to know how to relate to God. We want to know how this story, or this proverb, or this anecdote applies to our life. Tangibly. Really. And, why wait? We'd like to know right now, please.

“But, a relationship with God isn't so easy. God isn't composed of a series of facts, easily digestible and readily relatable. God is a mystery. God's Presence is enveloped in mystery. In fact, coming into God's Presence isn't like downloading a set of search results. It's like entering a thick cloud, where everything is obscured. Distorted. Colorless. Disorientated. But, there, in the midst of the cloud is the Presence of God who has come to be with you.

“As Christians, we need to learn how to sit in the cloud. As Christian leaders, we need to teach our flocks to do the same. We need to teach patience, and how to be comfortable not knowing about something, but rather really knowing Something.

“Moses came down from the clouded mountain with his face radiant—changed. Because it's in the cloud that we're changed.

“Peter, James, and John are changed on that mountain—forever. And, not because they learned lots of fun-filled facts. In reality, they probably descended with more questions than answers.

“But, like Moses, they met the Living God. And, *that's* what changes us. That's what alters the course of our lives. And, as Christians, that's what we're all about: being in God's Presence.”²

Brothers and sisters, sometimes all we can do is stand in God's presence and be filled with wonder and awe at the mystery and greatness of our God. Today we stand at the mountain and find ourselves overshadowed by the mystery of our Lord Jesus Christ who, though he is God's Beloved Son in all of his glory, chose to go to Jerusalem and die for our sins.

We can't just stand around all of the time, though, because God tells us “Listen to him! Obey him!” and Jesus himself tells us, “Follow me!” But, as we leave the mountain of glory and follow Jesus through Lent on his journey to the cross, let us hope and pray we will follow him and listen to him and obey him and serve him, always lost in wonder, love, and praise.

Let us pray: Lord God, we heard your words at Jesus' baptism. You reminded us that he is your beloved Son, with whom you are well pleased. Again today we hear your words that we are to listen to him, pay attention to him, obey him. Open our hearts this day, O Lord, to hear the words of Jesus, to follow in his footsteps, and to serve you. We ask this in Jesus Christ's name. Amen.

NOTES

¹William P. Brown, *Sacred Sense: Discovering the Wonder of God's Word and World* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2015), pp. vii - 11.

²Author unknown, found at www.pastorfergus.wordpress.com/2012 under "A Quote and a Prayer from Transfiguration Sunday."

³Rick Morley, "in the cloud — a reflection on Luke 9:28-36," January 31, 2013 at www.rickmorley.com.