

The Last Sunday after Epiphany
Speaking Glory
The Rev. Sue Sommer

Let me share two vignettes, paraphrased from an enormously talented colleague:

On the mountain, a man bent in prayer erupts in sudden light. His three sleepy disciples watch in fear and amazement as two figures appear and stand next to their beloved Master who seems lit from within. They speak solemnly about an exodus, accomplishment, Jerusalem. As a cloud descends and envelops them all, a voice tenderly addresses them as though knowing how terrified they are. They gaze at their Master – the Shining One – and a Father’s pure joy sings with the stars, “This is my beloved Son. Listen to him.”

In the valley, a boy thrashes uncontrollably on the ground, his eyes wide open, seeing only darkness. A crowd gathers, horrified by what they see. As the disciples try repeatedly to heal him, the crowd taunts them. “Why has he left you?” they ask, a blend of cynicism and triumph shading their voices. “We don’t know,” the disciples mutter. The boy shrieks and flails, striking his father, who clutches him to his chest as though he had the power to quiet the uncontrollable convulsions. “Please,” he sobs to the stars, “Please, this is my beloved son.”¹

It is the Last Sunday after Epiphany. As is the case every year, we hear the account of the Transfiguration of Jesus on the mountaintop from either Matthew, Mark, or – as is the case this year – Luke. In a liturgical season giving that explores how God is revealed in Christ, the Transfiguration caps them all – He is God’s beloved son, God’s words at his baptism are repeated, he appears with the greatest prophets of Israel, representing the Law & the Prophets, the whole thing prefigures his resurrection. It’s all there, it’s important, it deserves a yearly retelling...

...and....

Luke and the Lectionary together give us an amazing gift in the whole of this morning’s gospel – of mountain peak juxtaposed with valley low. Because Luke and the Church both entrust us with the inevitable questions that arise when we pay attention to it all. Questions like, does glory on the mountain speak to agony in the valley? What happens if it can’t? Aren’t there two beloved sons in this story?²

The Gospel tells us that Jesus invited three of his disciples up the mountain. We can do the math and realize that the remaining nine spent the night at the foot of the mountain. And as it happens, they spent that night trying their level best to heal the boy. They’d done it before. This wasn’t their first rodeo. At the beginning of the same chapter in Luke, Jesus had given to all twelve of the disciples power and authority to heal, and had sent them out to all the neighboring villages. Luke tells us that all of them experienced amazing success in that healing and teaching mission. But this time, barely 30 verses later, nada. What a tense scene it must have been, how increasingly panicked and humiliated the nine disciples must have been at their failure, how anguished the father must have been. In the midst of that nightlong trauma, did any of them have even the barest hint of the scene underway at the top of Mt. Tabor? The gospel does not say. But if we can bear to bring ourselves to look at it, we can surmise that that people in that valley, who desperately needed the healing touch of Jesus that night, experienced instead his absence.

¹ Debie Thomas, “The View from the Valley,” [Journey With Jesus](#), January 31, 2016.

² Ibid.

Maybe some of us can relate. How hard it can be some Sunday mornings to drag our weary carcass here when we're just not feeling it. When we're in that valley, and it appears that everyone else around us is on top of that mountain; and their evident joy and well-being only serves to make the trough we're in feel that much lower. Some of us have done hard time in that landscape of absence. You know. The place where songs of praise leave us cold, and assurances of God's love is so much meaningless chatter. It's hard to be that person. It's hard to be with that person.

And maybe we can relate beyond the personal or parochial level as well. As Christians, we draw our faith from the glory that is the Resurrection of Jesus, powerful hints of which we get in Scriptural passages like the Transfiguration. But when the Body of Christ fails to connect that glorious faith with the suffering in the valley, we have tragically missed the point. It isn't so much that we need to travel from one to the other. It's that we need to embrace the entire landscape. We love happy endings. Nothing wrong with that at all. It's just that sometimes, as we look for the ending to come, or celebrate the one that has, we lose sight of the meantime, of the vast landscape of difficulty or suffering that led to redemption, yes, but which remains part of us, part of our human journey, inextricably woven into our DNA.

It is instructive that Luke, again alone of the 3 gospels who tell of the Transfiguration, tells us that Jesus spoke with Moses and Elijah on the mountaintop of his departure. Except the word in Greek is Exodus. As in, the journey that Moses undertook with the Hebrews who were enslaved in Egypt that ultimately led to the Promised Land but which involved a great deal of suffering along the way. The parting of the Red Sea was miraculous...and... it was that 40 years in the wilderness that changed and formed them. Christ's eventual arrival in Jerusalem and his death on the cross will lead us, through his resurrection, from the bondage of sin into everlasting life. That is a claim that is foundational to our faith. And yet we also know that between the Mount of Transfiguration and Golgotha is a vast landscape that stands alongside the glory, neither cancelling it nor canceled by it.

Again, from my talented colleague: *Today's gospel shines a light on the greatest challenge, perhaps, that the [entire]Christian community – the Body of Christ -- faces: can we speak glory to agony, and agony to glory? Can we hold the mountain and the valley in faithful tension with each other – denying neither, embracing both? And can we do this hard, hard work out of pure love for each other so that no one among us – not the joyous one, not the anguished one, not the beloved one, not the broken one – is ever truly alone?*³

³ Ibid.