

LAST EPIPHANY (YEAR B), 22 February 2009
Good Shepherd, Berkeley
Jay E. Johnson

Mark 9:2-9

Ann started off our Epiphany season by reminding us that the place of peace and, well, of “epiphany” where the Magi visited Jesus with extravagant gifts – that place was a place to rest but not a place to stay.

A couple of weeks later, Tom Poyner echoed a similar theme with the image of “questing,” of setting out on an adventure. I suspect many of us resonated with that – I certainly did. I’m an adventure fantasy geek too, and love that stuff.

So Ann and Tom helped to set the tone for this season, a tone that works equally well for today, as it does every year at the end of this season. Today we catch again a glimpse of the transfigured Christ before plunging into Lent – and yes, Ash Wednesday is lurking around in this week ahead, ready to confront us again with the ashes of our mortality.

So this moment of glory, of brightness, of a transfigured humanity we have before us this morning – this moment is perhaps a place to rest but not to stay. A place to catch sight of the quest but not to linger. Or I suppose “rest” is not quite the right word for this particular story. More like a place for awe, bedazzlement, even worship. But it’s not a place to stay.

Peter’s not really on board with that concept, as you might have noticed. Either he doesn’t get it, or doesn’t want to get it, or he’s just stubbornly resisting. He’s been wandering around the Judean landscape with Jesus for some time by this point in the story. He’s had a few hair-raising moments along the way, and I’m guessing more than a few doubts about the wisdom of taking up with this enigmatic preacher/teacher/hearer/messiah-esque kind of guy.

If I were him, I’d be wanting a little payoff on the trust, a little return on that risky investment (if I dare use that analogy these days). Was Peter worried, I wonder, whether the “Kingdom of God” was just a spiritual Ponzi scheme? So this morning he finally gets a dividend, to say the least. Not just a vision but one in surround-sound complete with a heavenly voice.

So he wants to build a little booth and savor the moment. He wants to hold on to this for as long as he can, drink in the glory, feast on the glimpse, stop all the peripatetic wandering and let it all soak in.

Well, I’m with him.

I’ve lived in the same house in Richmond for eleven years now. That’s the longest I’ve been in one place, by far, since leaving home for college many years ago. There’s a reason for that – I was tired of moving around all the time.

It’s been fashionable for a while now in some spirituality circles to insist that it’s not the destination that matters but the journey. *Well, bah humbug to that.*

During my time working at PSR’s Center for Lesbian and Gay Studies in Religion and Ministry over the last six years I’ve done more traveling than I ever thought I would. There have been times when I didn’t know what city I was in without looking at the hotel stationery. Coming back to a place called home where I have some roots has never felt so luxurious or tasted quite as sweet.

In a world fixated on the next big thing, on always wondering “what’s next,” obsessed with staying ahead of the curve, and in which a laptop computer or a car or a kitchen appliance is

nearly obsolete the moment you walk out of the store with it – in a world like that, are there any moments of pausing, any moments to linger, any places to dwell, even for a little while?

We might be tempted to think that all of this is new; it isn't. Broadly speaking, Americans have always been a restless lot – migrating, colonizing, packing up again and moving on; wagons, ho! I was reminded of this just recently as I've been re-reading John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* (which seemed appropriate to do these days).

Jim Casy, an erstwhile preacher character in that novel, watches as countless trucks and cars stream out of the dustbowl called Oklahoma heading for the promised land of California. He watches them stream by and says, "What we comin' to? Seems to me we don't never come to nothin'. Always on the way. Always goin' and goin'. Why don't folks think about that? That's why folks always move. Move 'cause they want somepin better'n what they got."¹

Not much has changed today, it seems to me. Maybe you've noticed it too. Newscasters talk a mile a minute – can anyone talk as fast they do? Apparently so – we do it with each other all the time, even in academia, even among clergy, among friends and spouses: "Sorry. Would love to. Way too busy. Call me next week."

Something's way out of whack here. Does no one pause for a breath anymore? I don't. Are there no moments to relish anymore? I can hardly think of any.

Well, actually, one kind of a moment like that does come to mind, which some of us may have been fortunate enough to experience, perhaps even more than once. I'm thinking of the moment of being alone with another, the beloved, staring into that person's eyes, perhaps on the verge of kiss or in that moment between sentences when both of you take a breath and the air between you is electrically charged.

Perhaps, like me, you've thought in those moments of that old line about how "time stood still" and have perhaps wished that it would stay standing still for much longer. Along the lines of being a fantasy adventure geek, I really love the film *Insurrection*, one of several in the Star Trek: The Next Generation franchise.

In that film, the usual cast of characters stumbles on a planet where the ambient radiation slows down the process of aging, dramatically – for hundreds of years. The humans living there have also developed a skill of slowing down even that slow time in particularly poignant moments. They can, quite literally, make time stand still in those moments, to savor it, notice it, and really be there. I own that DVD and sometimes I fast forward to just those scenes. I'm entranced by them. They are for me religious experiences captured on film.

This, it seems to me, is Peter's moment in today's gospel story. And it's charged with eroticism. I don't mean all the many crude and pedestrian ways that word has been ground up in our society's titillation mill and made into silly glossy photographs or equally ridiculous x-rated films.

By "eroticism" I mean that literally breath-taking moment of tapping into a very deep desire, a desire I'm willing to argue is shared by us all, a desire that makes us whatever it is we mean by the word "human." It's the desire to get out of ourselves and into communion with another, a desire paradoxically and wonderfully expressed elsewhere in the gospels where Jesus insists that to give ourselves away is how to find our own true self returned to us – a self we never knew.

It's precisely that desire, I want to suggest, that Peter realized in that amazing moment of transfiguration glory. Who wouldn't want to dwell in such a moment as that? Who wouldn't

¹ *The Grapes of Wrath*, p. 173.

want to slow down the clock just then? Who wouldn't want to say, "enough with the journey! This is the destination where I want to be"?

I've heard plenty of sermons on this text – and I've delivered some of them myself – that berate Peter for his supposed ignorance, his blindness to what's really going on. "Oh, poor Peter," we preachers like to cluck. "He just didn't get it." To paraphrase a bit of Shakespeare here, those of us who do that with this text are a bit like that "lady who doth protest too much."

What are we afraid of by lingering? What kind of offense do we think we're committing by wanting to linger? In a world of frantic careening from one thing to the next, are we afraid of missing something? The "next big thing," perhaps?

Are we afraid of ossifying, of finding ourselves stuck in a rut? Are we afraid that all the other trendy people will get somewhere before us or without us?

Are we afraid of what all those voices in our heads will say if we stop long enough to listen? Are we afraid there won't be any voices at all?

Are we terrified that if we're not constantly on the move, constantly taking up the quest, that we'll realize what a barren and arid desert we're in that only our perpetual motion keeps us from seeing?

Are we mortified by the prospect that there might not be anything "There" there when we stop long enough to sit with silence, or emptiness, or loneliness, or just ourselves?

Okay, so those are harsh questions. But wow, if right now in our frenzied, frantic culture of economic collapse is not the time to ask them, when is?

So here are my two points, which will seem contradictory but they really do go together in some wacky, Gospel-logic kind of way.

First, it's okay not always to be frantically questing. Really; it's okay. More than that, for our sanity, our spiritual health, our encounters with the unfathomable mystery of God, we have to stop now and then. *We have to.*

Rowan Williams reminds us that every object and every person, without exception, is in some kind of relationship with God before they're in a relationship of any kind with us. This, Williams notes, should certainly "make us approach the world and other people with reverence and amazement."² But here's the thing: reverence and amazement rarely if ever take root with a double-shot latte in one hand, a cell-phone in the other, and a steering wheel between our knees. You're going to have to pause the action – this is absolutely necessary. Or as Dorothy reminds us at the end of *The Wizard of Oz*, you're heart's desire waits for you in your own backyard.

But here's the second point: we really can't linger there. Ann and Tom are right about that. We can't afford ever to assume that the place of resting or even of reverence and amazement is the final stop on the train of faith. Here's why, which is also what Peter needed to learn: to stop there with finality is to fall into idolatry. It would put Jesus up on a pedestal with all those Greek gods. It would mean assuming that Temple worship is what we're made for rather than living, loving, flourishing, and thriving.

Peter had to learn, just as many of us do, that Jesus won't sit still in a booth. He comes down from that mountain and makes his way toward Jerusalem. That's where we're going, too, starting this Wednesday, as we make our way toward the place of the Cross where everything we thought we wanted and everything we thought we'd be...well...all of it dies.

² *Tokens of Trust: An Introduction to Christian Belief*, p. 35.

I can't think of a better way to describe the current sense of trauma in American society today. I heard an economist on NPR this past week say that he doesn't like the word "depression" or even "recession." He prefers instead to think of this crisis we're in as a time to press the "reset" button; a time to reconsider what our priorities really are and should be.

That sounds like Lent. Or what Lent could be for us if we just stop now and then but refuse to linger.

A friend and colleague once reminded me that nowhere in the gospels does Jesus say "worship me"; he says only "follow me." That's a pretty good summary of this morning's story from Mark; and it works really well for Lent.

May this year's Lenten season be for all of us a fruitful time of stripping away everything that really doesn't matter and discovering again, as if for the first time, our heart's true desire.

Amen.