

Glorious Mystery

Mark 9:2-9

The best things about religion and for that matter life itself make little rational sense! Let's face it, try to explain concepts like the Trinity, incarnation, salvation, resurrection, and God to a non-believer, or for that matter to a believer! Rationality can only take one so far. Sooner or later rationality must be left behind and one must move into the realm of artists, poets, and prophets. Kierkegaard had it right, sooner or later, and probably sooner, one must simply make that leap of faith into the abyss, trusting, hoping that there is a Divine Mystery to embrace us, support us, and transfigure us. And the funny thing is that a miracle happens every now and then, we become convinced that this leap into the abyss with nothing more than faith is not in vain! There are moments of glorious mystery!

I can't help myself, like many I fall back on rationality when my sense of the glorious mystery fails me, which it unfortunately does most of the time! It was Rudolf Otto who first said that all religions, Christianity and every other religion known to humankind, begins and ends in what he called the *numinous*. He said that all religions and religious experiences begin and end with non-rational mystery. Now let us be clear that non-rational and irrational are not the same thing. It highlights a basic truth of this universe, namely, that rational thought can not explain everything, nor is it necessarily the best form of expression for exploring the mystery of life and being. It is a definite case of the whole being greater than the sum of the parts!

Plato, in his philosophical examination of the world, concluded that there were ideal "*forms*" behind everything that we could see, taste, touch, smell, and hear. Later Paul Tillich would use the phrase "*Ground of Being*," in his

discussions of God. What it all comes down to is that ultimately language itself fails us as we explore the ultimate, the mystery out of which all being arises and into which it later descends in death or disillusion.

Now I could get into a whole discussion of the historicity of the Transfiguration story. Many commentators believe it did not happen, at least not in the same way the Revolutionary War happened. Some think it is a post-resurrection story that has become displaced. Others speculate that it might be a prophetic vision. Others say it simply meets the writer of the Gospel of Mark's needs as a story teller.

Even N.T. Wright, who no one can accuse of not being orthodox or traditional in his approach to Scripture, refuses to use the Transfiguration story in his book that explores the historical Jesus' view of himself. He simply concludes that "IF" this happened it would reinforce Jesus self-image and calling.

Personally, I tend to believe that the Transfiguration is a prophetic vision, post-resurrection or otherwise. Of course this could be an excellent example of the rational overruling the numinous, the glorious mystery!

Whatever it is, the Christian community has treasured this story for generations. It encapsulates much of what we believe about Jesus and it teaches us much about being disciples of this Jesus, who we call the Christ. It is perhaps no accident that Mark places this story between Jesus' words on discipleship at the end of chapter 8 "*If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who want to lose their life for my sake, and the sake of the gospel, will find it.*" And his discussion of second coming of the messiah and Elijah's role at this time, in verses 11-13 of chapter 9. The story of the Transfiguration takes place around an

exploration of discipleship until the second coming. It speaks to us of how to live in this in-between time, until the ultimate mystery comes in all its fullness.

First, notice that Peter, that model for all that is human, wants to control and domesticate the glorious mystery. He recognizes that “it is good” but his reaction is “to build three tents.” He wants to develop a ritual and pilgrimage site. Perhaps he even envisions himself staying on as priest and chief interpreter of what happened there. Or perhaps he just wants to keep on experiencing this marvelous mystery, to become, as the old hymn puts it, “lost in wonder, love and praise.”

More importantly, he seems to have missed the greater depths of meaning in this glorious mystery. He addresses Jesus as “rabbi,” as if he were an ordinary man, or even a holy man like Moses or Elijah, who represent the best of the law and the prophets. For Christians, as great as Moses and Elijah, the law and the prophets were, Jesus totally transcends the holiness of both.

What Peter has seen, as glorious as it is with Moses and Elijah back from the dead or descended from heaven, Jesus shinning with the light of God this is not the main message of this glorious mystery. The voice comes from the heavens to correct and deepen Peter’s and our understanding, **“This is my Son, the beloved; listen to him.”** It starts out the same way as at Jesus baptism, but it ends on the note of “Listen to him.”

Jesus becomes the model for discipleship. Jesus doesn’t stay up on that mountain. He knows he must come down and journey on to Jerusalem, to his death on a cross. He knows that the disciples can’t stay up there either, if they are to be his disciples. They too must come back down from their reverie and reenter the world of the ordinary. They too must pick up their

cross and follow him. As marvelous a mystery as the transfiguration was it pales in comparison to what is about to come in Jesus' death and resurrection. This glorious holy mystery will not take place on some high, holy mountain, but on a small hill called the Skull, near the city of Jerusalem's garbage dump. It will come to full fruition in a borrowed tomb in a cemetery and later in the upper room where they had just days earlier eaten the Passover meal together.

Could it be that if we but listen to Christ the glorious mystery can shine through the ordinary in our lives, lived amidst our morning coffee, TV, reading the junk mail, and taking out the garbage? Are there crosses to be born in the midst of these things? Is there a glorious mystery ready to be uncovered?

Frederick Buechner in his book *The A, B, C's of Grace* looks at his everyday life and imagines a ghost coming to him and saying, "My dear lad, I would give my immortal soul if I were sure I had one for just one taste of that rain on my tongue, one tabby touch of that ramshackle cat. I would give my three-cornered black hat for just the nuisance of X and K again or the lilt and folly of L. And for the sound of my own name on somebody's else's lips . . . somebody calling me by name through an open door. . . ."

Buechner says of this, "Another life – alive, like you, by the giddy grace of God – reaches across the light years that separate each from the other and touches your hand and names your name like God the Father on Michelangelo's ceiling who reaches out of the cloud and touches Adam, names Adam's flesh to holy life. On the third planet from the sun you will touch another's life to life and be touched. Be alive this first and holy day because order has been created out of chaos, light out of dark, so you can

see, touch taste, and smell and tell this day that you have never seen before because it has never been before.”

The ghost breaks in, saying, “And this day you will never see again.” Only this time, Buechner says, it is his ghost, the “death I will die, who catches me as I step out combed, brushed, shod, into the room where my youngest child lies asleep with a huge snake uncoiled beside her. She lies heavy on her pillows as if she has fallen there, and one arm is around the neck of her temporally gentle bedfellow. All the days of your life have brought you to this day, the ghost says, and you must live it as though it is your last day as yourself because be assured that it is. You will never see this day again once it has passed, and never again will you be this self.”

Listen....listen....listen....listen....Amen.