

In Praise of the Humdrum

Luke 9.28-36 (The Message)

Transfiguration Sunday

February 14, 2010

If God speaks anywhere, it is into our personal lives. Maybe nothing extraordinary happens at all – just one day following another in the manner of days. We sleep and dream. We wake. We work. We remember and forget. We have fun and are depressed. And at moments of even the most humdrum of our days, God speaks.

- Frederick Buechner (adapted)

The Reading

About eight days after saying this, he climbed the mountain to pray, taking Peter, John, and James along. While he was in prayer, the appearance of his face changed and his clothes became blinding white. At once two men were there talking with him. They turned out to be Moses and Elijah—and what a glorious appearance they made! They talked over his exodus, the one Jesus was about to complete in Jerusalem. Meanwhile, Peter and those with him were slumped over in sleep. When they came to, rubbing their eyes, they saw Jesus in his glory and the two men standing with him. When Moses and Elijah had left, Peter said to Jesus, "Master, this is a great moment! Let's build three memorials: one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah." He blurted this out without thinking. While he was babbling on like this, a light-radiant cloud enveloped them. As they found themselves buried in the cloud, they became deeply aware of God. Then there was a voice out of the cloud: "This is my Son, the Chosen! Listen to him." When the sound of the voice died away, they saw Jesus there alone. They were speechless. And they continued speechless, said not one thing to anyone during those days of what they had seen.

You may have noticed that the title of today's sermon runs a little on the folksy side; *In Praise of the Humdrum*. Humdrum is one of those words whose meaning never quite sticks with you, no matter how many times folk try to define or explain it. Have you ever experienced such a word? I know I have. When I was a child, for example, the elusive word for me was haint. This word would come up often on clear summer evenings when we kids were allowed to play outdoors well into the twilight. We would chase around under the trees hoopin' and hollerin'; in general just havin' a good ol' time. As the day faded we became aware of the night's beauty: the glitter of early rising stars, and the glow of lightnin' bugs as thick as

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snowflakes. And just as the darkness crept over us someone would sing, "Ain't no haints out tonight, 'cause grandpa killed 'em all last night." I'll be honest; that song didn't make any sense to me – I had no idea what a haint might be – but the word sounded ominous so I quietly thanked God for my grandpa and his heroic efforts on my behalf.

Certain words don't stick with you very long, and the word humdrum, I think, may be counted among them. Humdrum: the dull and boring, the average, the lackluster unfurling of life one day at a time. Humdrum; sounds kinda' like a yawn, doesn't it? Why in the world would I choose to praise the dull and boring? And why would I choose to build my case on such an extraordinary event like the Transfiguration of Jesus? That effort seems self defeating to say the least. Nevertheless I believe that praise for the humdrum is in order; and that the story of the Transfiguration indirectly makes the point for me, especially when viewed from the perspective of the disciples.

Speaking of the disciples; here we have that famous trio again - Peter, James, and John – accomplished at misunderstanding, noticeably lacking in courage, quick to anger... and prone to fall asleep at the wrong times. They have been chosen by Jesus to witness this spectacle on the mountaintop. After arriving at the summit, sure enough, they fall asleep while Jesus prays. When they wake up, they find themselves privy to a scene that is anything but humdrum. They see Jesus in a glorified state - his countenance glowing, his garments dazzling – and with him stand Moses and Elijah. Peter is moved by the vision and suggests that they enshrine the moment by building three memorials; one for each of these heavenly figures. Before he can act, however, he and his companions are overcome with a sense of awe and a keen awareness of the very presence of God. No voice is needed; but one is thrown in for good measure, "This is my Son, the Chosen! Listen to him."

As Luke reports the story, the disciples are so taken with this experience that they are speechless. There are no words to describe such an experience. The disciples are speechless; Matthew and Mark both report that Jesus charges the disciples not to say anything about this experience, but I love Luke's conclusion that flows from the story itself, the portrayal of disciples so overwhelmed by the presence of God that there simply are no words to describe the experience.

This story comes nowhere near the humdrum; but as striking as this story is, I am continually baffled by the disciples' ability to forget about it so quickly. I am struck by the fact that it makes little if any impact on their attitude. No sooner than they descend the mountain, no sooner than they reenter the valley, no sooner than they take up the routine of daily life, no sooner than they are reabsorbed into the humdrum of life, they forget this experience. They forget the transfigured countenance of Jesus, they forget being overwhelmed with awe and wonder, shrouded in the presence of mystery and of God. I am at a loss for words to explain how it can have virtually no impact on their lives. The disciples will have to be hit on the head several more times before they begin to glimpse who Jesus is, before they begin to see Jesus through the eyes of faith.

There is another baffling twist in the disciples' experience. When they finally begin to see Jesus through the eyes of faith, it's not in a blinding mountaintop experience, it's in a – what shall we say? – a valley experience. It develops slowly, this new vision, and it develops slap dab in the middle of daily life and its routine. It develops amidst the daily grind of traveling from one village to another, seeing Jesus reach out in compassion to heal the sick and lift up the downtrodden, hearing Jesus teach and share good news with the poor, seeing Jesus meet needs one person at a time; again and again and again. Is the ill one a Samaritan? No matter; Jesus reaches out in love. Is the leper impure – a sinner as the righteous would express it – no matter; Jesus reaches out in love. To witness this boundless compassion and courageous love time and again is to see Jesus from a transformed perspective; it is to see Jesus as the Light of God shining anew in our lives and our world.

It is tempting to devote our lives to the quest for a mountaintop experience. It is tempting to think that our faith is validated only by a mountaintop experience – an exceptional, otherworldly event - and in consequence we undervalue or dismiss all else. It is tempting to seek a mountaintop experience as a stamp of approval on our lives and our faith; an experience that replaces faith with a divine sign that proves God's love for us. It is tempting to seek the exceptional, the intense if occasional experience of God on the mountaintop; but when we do we miss the spiritual dimension of ninety-nine percent of our lives; we miss the opportunity to look through the humdrum to the holy.

The experience of the disciples shows that there really are no fleeting moments in life. If Buechner is correct, and I believe he is, there is no experience in your life that God cannot be present to, there is no experience, no moment in your life to which God cannot speak; there is no experience so humdrum that you cannot look through the humdrum to the holy. Do you want to see God through the eyes of faith; then look through the eyes of a child as they gleam with joy, listen to the giddy laughter of a teenager, observe the action of one individual reaching out in compassion to another, simply because there is a need. There are no fleeting moments in life, there is no humdrum existence; that is, unless we refuse to recognize the holy through the humdrum. If we choose to recognize the holy, however, we too may find ourselves shrouded in a cloud of holiness even while standing on Main Street.