

Chasing the Light

Matthew 17.1-9 (The Message)

March 6, 2011

Transfiguration Sunday

Suddenly they saw him the way he was, the way he really was all the time... This is how he was, radiant, brilliant, carrying joy like a flaming sun in his hands. This is the way he was- is- from the beginning, and we cannot bear it. So he manned himself, came manifest to us, and there on the mountain they saw him, really saw him, saw his light.

- Madeleine L'Engle

Six days later, three of them saw that glory. Jesus took Peter and the brothers, James and John, and led them up a high mountain. His appearance changed from the inside out, right before their eyes. Sunlight poured from his face. His clothes were filled with light. Then they realized that Moses and Elijah were also there in deep conversation with him. Peter broke in, "Master, this is a great moment! What would you think if I built three memorials here on the mountain— one for you, one for Moses, one for Elijah?" While he was going on like this, babbling, a light-radiant cloud enveloped them, and sounding from deep in the cloud a voice: "This is my Son, marked by my love, focus of my delight. Listen to him." When the disciples heard it, they fell flat on their faces, scared to death. But Jesus came over and touched them. "Don't be afraid." When they opened their eyes and looked around all they saw was Jesus, only Jesus. Coming down the mountain, Jesus swore them to secrecy. "Don't breathe a word of what you've seen. After the Son of Man is raised from the dead, you are free to talk."

As the Disciples made their way down the mountain after a vision such as this, I am quite sure they were asking themselves, "Who is this Jesus?" As a matter of fact, this is the question that followers of the Galilean have asked since that day at Caesarea Philippi when Jesus sat down with his disciples before beginning their trip to Jerusalem and asked about the descriptions others were giving of him. Who is this Jesus?

As you can imagine there have been any number of responses to this question. Some folk would say Jesus is a prophet, or Jesus is a wisdom teacher. Others would describe Jesus as a social activist. In addition, and quite obviously, Jesus is a peasant; Jesus is a Jew. Jesus is the way, the truth and the light in John's gospel. Some would say Jesus is "Either who he says he is or the world's biggest liar," and you have probably seen this statement on a bumper sticker. I recently heard an interesting exchange about Jesus on a television drama, *The Good Wife*. The

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good wife herself described Jesus to her daughter as a man who lived two thousand years ago and has nothing to do with me. Finally, in the musical *Jesus Christ Superstar*, Mary Magdalene says of Jesus, “He’s a man, he’s just a man,” and the classic, “I don’t know how to love him.”

A few hundred years after the time of Jesus, the Church thought it had put an end to this question, considering the formula *True God and True Man* to be definitive and exhaustive; period; end of story. But I wonder if we should place a period after this description? What have we said about Jesus and his impact on our lives when we call him true God and true man?

How can we take this formula into the market place? What in the world could it mean in our day? Think about it, as we worship, the space ship Columbia is preparing to separate from the space station for the last time... the last flight of the space shuttle Columbia. In the Arabic world there is strife and unrest. In Egypt the people are waiting to see what will happen in the vacuum left by the departure of Hosni Mubarak. And Egypt is not alone; there is strife and bloodshed In Libya, and similar protests in several Arabic states. Closer to home, in Wisconsin teachers are fighting for their jobs and concerned about their retirement. And for goodness’ sake, I went to the gas station the other day and for the first time paid over \$50 to fill my tank.

Our world is full of strife and uncertainty, conflict, and impending change. How does Jesus as true god and true man play in this world, our world? What difference can this Jesus make in our lives? For that matter, what difference can any of the Jesus’ described above make in our lives; especially if we have to choose one above all the others; especially if we have to place a period at the end of the sentence. The sheer number of responses given to this question – Who is Jesus? – shows that confusion and misunderstanding remain. Or perhaps they show that no one description can be adequate; perhaps they say something significant about Jesus, but don’t exhaust the possibilities; perhaps they represent a caution not to be too quick to place a period at the end of the sentence.

Today’s gospel reading reinforces the notion that no one description of Jesus is adequate for faith, and that a period should never be used at the end of the sentence. Whatever we think we know about Jesus, the transfiguration scene reveals, there is always more. With Jesus there is always more than meets the eye. This is, to be sure, the experience of

the disciples who have by this time been with Jesus for some time; traveling the dusty roads, seeking shelter from the wind, going hungry for want of hearth and home. On this lonely mountain they are blessed with a glimpse beyond; a glimpse of who this Jesus really is. Through this man they see something of the divine majesty and glory shining through, and they learn first-hand that there is more here than meets the eye. They begin to glimpse that their understanding of Jesus – and their relationship with him – must continue to unfold along the way.

This is the way it was for the early Christians, there was no true God and true man; period, end of story. There was no definitive description that could put the question behind them. Rather, they learned about Jesus the hard way. They learned by first knowing the *man*, Jesus of Nazareth; a man like them, a peasant, an artisan; they learned by knowing the man, and only slowly, very slowly came to understand something of the glory that always shone through if only they had eyes to see. Jesus – and his meaning for their lives - continued to unfold, revealing more about how to live and walk in the world. They would continue chasing the light they had glimpsed in Jesus, knowing that with Jesus, there is always more than first meets the eye.

In my estimation, the disciples were lucky to meet and know Jesus first as a man; because it is the man Jesus - the Galilean, the teacher, the healer, the sage - who wants to lead us into the world, and whom we can follow into the world. The man Jesus doesn't desire our homage, our worship; he wants us to follow him into the world to live and serve as he did. And in so doing we come to know him, to trust him, and to be like him.

The man Jesus doesn't want the spotlight on himself. He doesn't want adoration and praise alone. Someone once called Jesus good, and he immediately dispelled that notion; "No one is good except the Father," he said. For Jesus, it was always about God, always about the kingdom of God, and living into that kingdom one step at a time, one day at a time, one act of loving service at a time.

We are often told that we do Jesus more honor by calling him by his divine name, by understanding him as the very glory of God – True God and True Man, as it were - but this Jesus we can only worship from afar. We can't follow this Jesus into the world to live and serve. And

this *is* our calling, to walk with Jesus into the world to work for justice and peace; to live lives of passion, compassion, and gentleness.

The disciples of Jesus were lucky to know him first as a man, because they could follow this man into the world to learn of him, serve with him, and with him inaugurate the kingdom of God on earth. And as they did their understanding and experience continued to unfold, and their lives became more meaningful as they walked. We, too, can follow this man, and as we do the meaning of his life and the meaning of his life for ours will continually unfold, because with this Jesus there's always more than meets the eye. There's always more to see, there's always more to do, there's always more empowerment, more challenge, more joy. No matter how much we think we know about Jesus, there's always more to unfold, and like the early disciples we too will continue chasing the light of God in Christ, even while walking with him. Faith comes in *doing*, and the light shines through in *walking* hand in hand with Jesus of Nazareth, offering love, peace, and compassion to a world that could use a lion's share of all three.