

When Lightning Strikes

The first sermon in a series entitled
From Emmaus to Pentecost

Luke 24.13-31 (The Message)

May 15, 2011

Tell all the Truth but tell it slant---
Success in circuit lies
Too bright for our infirm delight
The Truth's superb surprise
As lightening to the Children eased
With explanation kind
The Truth must dazzle gradually
Or every man be blind---

- Emily Dickinson

That same day two of them were walking to the village Emmaus, about seven miles out of Jerusalem. They were deep in conversation, going over all these things that had happened. In the middle of their talk and questions, Jesus came up and walked along with them. But they were not able to recognize who he was. He asked, "What's this you're discussing so intently as you walk along?" They just stood there, long-faced, like they had lost their best friend. Then one of them, his name was Cleopas, said, "Are you the only one in Jerusalem who hasn't heard what's happened during the last few days?" He said, "What has happened?" They said, "The things that happened to Jesus the Nazarene. He was a man of God, a prophet, dynamic in work and word, blessed by both God and all the people. Then our high priests and leaders betrayed him, got him sentenced to death, and crucified him. And we had our hopes up that he was the One, the One about to deliver Israel. And it is now the third day since it happened. But now some of our women have completely confused us. Early this morning they were at the tomb and couldn't find his body. They came back with the story that they had seen a vision of angels who said he was alive. Some of our friends went off to the tomb to check and found it empty just as the women said, but they didn't see Jesus." Then he said to them, "So thick-headed! So slow-hearted! Why can't you simply believe all that the prophets said? Don't you see that these things had to happen, that the Messiah had to suffer and only then enter into his glory?" Then he started at the beginning, with the Books of Moses, and went on through all the Prophets, pointing out everything in the Scriptures that referred to him. They came to the edge of the village where they were headed. He acted as if he were going on but they pressed him: "Stay and have supper with us. It's nearly evening; the day is done." So he went in with them. And here is what happened: He sat down at the table with them. Taking the bread, he blessed and broke and gave it to them. At that moment, open-eyed, wide-eyed, they recognized him. And then he disappeared.

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Were you afraid of lightning when you were a kid? I'll be the first to admit; lightning scared me to death. But it wasn't that simple; I had more like a love-hate relationship with lightning. While it scared me half out of my britches, nothing was more awe inspiring and exciting for me than the approach of a thunderstorm. It was mesmerizing to watch the storm clouds roll in, feel the wind pick up and the temperature drop ten degrees in a matter of minutes; and suddenly a bright summer's day became dark and threatening.

I always sensed the presence of God in the approach of a thunderstorm, so I often climbed my favorite tree to get as close to God as possible, and to watch the approach of the storm. High in the tree top – it was probably twenty to twenty-five feet, but when I was a kid it seemed as high as the Eiffel Tower – I would sway back and forth in the wind as the front approached. I will never forget those magical moments, and neither would my mom who always feared I would be struck by lightning.

I had a love-hate relationship with lightning as a kid; it both exhilarated and scared the waddin' out of me. It took years for me to grow out of that fear, but as I came to understand the workings of nature I became cautiously confident in its presence. As Emily Dickenson expresses the matter in the poem that graces our worship order this morning, children are naturally scared by lightning, but when a kind and gentle explanation helps them understand its nature, the fear eases.

It occurs to me that our experience of God is much like this. Allowing the fullness of God's presence into our lives can feel much like the approach of a thunderstorm. God by nature is simply too much for us. God is always more than we can comprehend, awesome beyond our wildest imaginings, totally beyond our control, and thus God's presence can be intimidating and fearful. This Truth we must take *slanted*; that is to say in bits and pieces, fits and starts, circling around God until at long last some semblance of understanding and comfort arises; however tentative. We must learn over time to be comfortable with God rather than scared silly by the presence of the very source and fulfillment of Life itself.

Our experience of God can be like the shock of lightning striking; much as it was for Cleopas and his friend when finally they recognized the stranger in their midst. I began my reflections on this Emmaus experience in a meditation last week, and in response to several requests, will begin today a series of sermons to delve more deeply into its meaning and application in our lives. Just

like Cleopas we need our eyes opened to the mystery of God's presence, we need to grow in awareness of God, and we need to become comfortable walking in God's presence step by step, day by day. Please pray with me.

God, while it scares us witless to do so, we invite you to be present in our lives this day, this hour. Strike like lightning and turn our world upside down, expand our vision, challenge and comfort us, and help us to learn that your coming to us is also a coming through us, that your presence – as exhilarating and frightening as it can be - is an experience to be shared with others. In Christ's name we pray. Amen.

Last week we focused on the mystery with which the Emmaus dinner scene ends; that is to say, no sooner than the disciples' eyes are opened the risen Lord up and disappears. This seems downright strange. Think about it; these disciples have been with Jesus for hours, chatting away while walking to Emmaus; they have been with Jesus ...they just didn't recognize him. So after hours of theological discussion – which they did not understand – companionship, and shared hunger and fatigue, they shared a meal and their eyes were opened. One would think Jesus would take this opportunity to make hay while the sun shines. He's been trying for hours to bring them up to speed on the Messiah's fate. Now they recognize who is talking to them; now they will heed what he is saying; now they will be able to act on their new understanding; but instead of taking full advantage of this situation, Jesus up and disappears.

This is the Emmaus mystery, and its meaning has significant impact on our understanding of the passage as a whole. Does Jesus' abrupt disappearance mean that God's presence in our lives is fleeting and short lived? Does it mean that while Jesus appeared to the early disciples he has withdrawn and is no longer present? The answer to both questions is a clear no. Despite the abrupt disappearance of the risen Lord, this passage is about presence from beginning to end; this can't be underscored enough about Luke's narrative. This passage is not about a jack-in-the-box God who appears and disappears willy-nilly. This passage promises God's presence in the risen Lord to all who fellowship in the Spirit. And yet Jesus disappears. If we're going to understand this experience and make it a part of our lives, we have to come to terms with this mystery.

Some folk might ask why we have to make so much of Jesus' disappearance; why we have to deal with mystery at all. That's simply what happened; it's a fact; take it or leave it. Just give us a plain and simple answer, preacher; just tell us who God is and what God wants us to do ...and we'll go out and do it. We just need instructions; we just need practical rules for living a life pleasing to God.

To be sure, it is possible to ignore the mystery of God and focus on simple facts and practical advice for living. But to do so, Luke would say, is to ignore God, and God's dynamic presence in our lives. It is possible to settle for faith without mystery. But to do so, Luke would say, is to settle for a God "out there" somewhere, watching from a distance and yet not allowed to touch our hearts and make an impact in our lives. It is possible to settle for experience without mystery, but this is not the Emmaus experience. The Emmaus experience grapples with mystery; the Emmaus experience depends on mystery; the Emmaus experience is founded on the intimate presence of God in our lives and the relationship that presence makes possible.

It is possible to be satisfied with faith as simple fact, with practical examples of living, with commands and creeds and confessions of faith *about* God; but Luke is dealing with something much more intimate and true than fact. He's talking about the living presence of God, and for that facts simply won't do. Facts don't contain enough Truth; facts can't deliver on the promise of knowing God intimately. God is always more than our comprehension, more than our understanding, more than our will; our only option is to let God come into our lives on God's terms. And that involves mystery. This is the gist of the Emmaus experience.

So... all that being said; what does the abrupt disappearance of Jesus mean? What does it tell us about faith and our experience of God? It tells us, firstly, that it is the fullness of God present to us. Please think about this for a moment. Luke is not saying that we have a written promise from God to be a part of our lives... someday. Luke is not saying that while we can only talk *about* God for now, someday we will know God in an intimate manner. Luke is saying that God - the very source of all that is, the very creative power of the Universe - wants to be a part of our lives every day. It doesn't matter how mundane the activities of the day, it doesn't matter how boring the day... no matter how routine the activities, God has promised to be present.

Folks, it's not the kid next door coming to sell coupons for his soccer team, it's the all-powerful, everywhere present, ever creating God who is active and present in our lives when we open our hearts. This is the recognition that comes like a flash of lightning; this is the awareness we have to live our way into slowly, ever so slowly; this is the Truth we must hear *slant*, lest we all be blinded.

We have to hear this Truth slanted, we have to become comfortable with God's presence over a lifetime, because, truth be known, our record of being open to God, receptive to God's

presence, is spotty at best. Sometimes we're willing to acknowledge God's presence, sometimes we deny it altogether. More times than not we're blithely unaware that God is with us. The miracle, of course, is that God is with us all the time, it's just that most of the time we walk along like Cleopas and his friend, naively unaware that the risen Lord is with us. Open our minds and hearts, however, and God's presence will change our lives completely; God's presence will dazzle us and lead us into a life that makes a difference. Please allow me to share with you three examples of how our lives are changed when lightning strikes.

Firstly, we will never again see the world only through our eyes when we acknowledge God's presence. We will, rather, see the world as God sees it; a world in which all things were created for goodness and beauty; a world in which all people are *neighbor*; a world that is more than half full of truth and beauty. This is a different world than the one we normally see. We have friends and enemies; those who are on our side whom we welcome into our lives, and those who oppose us and are not welcome. But when we look *with* God onto the world, our vision is no longer clouded by fear, with love for some and hatred for others. Rather, we see the world as God sees it; full of beauty, opportunity, neighbors, and those waiting to be our neighbors. The spiritual life is not about practical instructions for living. The spiritual life is about being open to the intimate presence of God, and the opportunities that experience affords us.

Secondly, we will never again have to do anything alone. God is with us, partnering with us, bringing about the things he wishes in our lives. This is what Paul meant when he said it's no longer I who act, but Christ who lives in me. He didn't mean that he had become a puppet whose strings were pulled by the divine puppet master. He means that faith is about partnership. Paul in faith opened his heart to God and God was with him – in him - accomplishing with him the good God alone can clearly see. When we live in the mystery of God's presence, we never have to do anything alone.

Lastly, when lightning strikes and we contend with the mystery of God's presence, we will realize that God's presence is never for us alone. God is not only present to us and in us, but ever and always through us into the lives of others. That's the advantage of seeing *neighbor* when we look out from our little perch, because all the divine blessings that are offered to us each and every day are intended to pass through us into the lives of others.

The Emmaus experience is as challenging as it is awesome. When lightning strikes, when we allow ourselves awareness of God's presence, when we grapple with the mystery that is God, we begin a journey in which we ever so slowly grow in comfort and understanding of God's presence in our lives; and ever so slowly in the knowledge that this presence is to be shared with others.