

"Cleverly Devised Myths"

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Sensation of the Mystical

The most beautiful and profound emotion we can experience
is the sensation of the mystical.

It is the sower of all true science.

He to whom this emotion is a stranger,
who can no longer wonder and stand rapt in awe,
is as good as dead.

To know that what is impenetrable to us really exists,
manifesting itself as the highest wisdom
and the most radiant beauty,
which our dull faculties can comprehend
only in their primitive forms –
this knowledge, this feeling,
is at the centre of true religion.

~ Albert Einstein ~

The description of Jesus' transfiguration is always read on the last Sunday of the season of Epiphany, the season of shining light and sudden insight.

Readings: 2 Peter 1.16-21

For we did not follow cleverly devised myths when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we had been eyewitnesses of his majesty. For he received honour and glory from God the Father when that voice was conveyed to him by the Majestic Glory, saying, 'This is my Son, my Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.' We ourselves heard this voice come from heaven, while we were with him on the holy mountain.

So we have the prophetic message more fully confirmed. You will do well to be attentive to this as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts. First of all you must understand this, that no prophecy of scripture is a matter of one's own interpretation, because no prophecy ever came by human will, but men and women moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God.

Matthew 17.1-9

Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and his brother John and led them up a high mountain, by themselves. And he was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became dazzling white. Suddenly there appeared to them Moses and Elijah, talking with him. Then Peter said to Jesus, 'Lord, it is good for us to be here; if you wish, I will make three dwellings here, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.' While he was still speaking, suddenly a bright cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud a voice said, 'This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!' When the disciples heard this, they fell to the ground and were overcome by fear. But Jesus came and touched them, saying, 'Get up and do not be afraid.' And when they looked up, they saw no one except Jesus himself alone.

As they were coming down the mountain, Jesus ordered them, 'Tell no one about the vision until after the Son of Man has been raised from the dead.'

May God bless to our understanding these words from the Holy Scriptures.

This is a very difficult story for us to hear – it is so extreme, so full of grand symbol and portent. Mountains, visions of prophets, the voice of God. It operates outside our normal semantic universe, our usual realm of meaning. One lectionary member said, is this a hallucination? Unlike so many other stories of Jesus – loaves and fishes for example, that we heard last week – there seems not to be any way to wrestle it into a moral framework. It really isn't about sharing, or healing, or caring for the poor. Not about how to be a good person. It's about a very weird experience on a mountaintop.

There are a number of things we should notice about the story. First, the high mountain – a clear New Testament code for 'divine'. So we get the point that what happens here will be very special, and having to do with God. We see Moses, the one who went up another mountain to receive the Law – and remember, he too returned radiant. Elijah, the first of the great prophets, and the one whose return was to be the signal to Israel that the Messiah was about to arrive.

Note too, the sensuality of the story – we imagine the strenuous uphill hike, the brightness of the day, and the beautiful view from the top. Then the sheer glory of the vision. Jesus himself dazzling their eyes. But as if from nowhere, a cloud. If you've traveled in mountains you may have experienced the strangeness of finding yourself inside a cloud. The eeriness of the light, the sudden dampness of the misty air on your skin, sometimes an odd smell, maybe ozone. And then they hear a voice, unmistakable, the very voice of God. So shocking that they actually collapse in a heap. For the first and only time noted in scripture, Jesus touches them. He often touches children, and blind people and sinners, but not the disciples, except at this moment. He is often so tough on them. But today he shows a tenderness that we seldom see.

The plain meaning of the text is impossible to evade. The story of the Transfiguration really insists that we ask the questions we have been reading about in *The Observer*. Do we believe in a God who speaks? Was Jesus something more than a great moral teacher? What do we mean if we say, God acts? Can we relate to and affirm something as 'out there' as this mystical encounter on a mountaintop, or should we say, well, we are post-theistic?

Post-theistic means, *after* believing in God. Or, in Ken Gallinger's words, an authentic spirituality without the big guy in the sky. Should we, as a matter of intellectual integrity, discard much of the Christian tradition as outdated superstition,

just a poetical way of expressing universal truths? Should we move decisively away from the old language because it misleads, as Gretta Vosper recommends? Must we receive these stories as *cleverly devised myths*, as Peter fears in the passage Nikhil read earlier.

The problem with some post-theistic thinking is that it has a naivety of its own. It says, if I don't get it, it isn't possible. If I don't see it, it is not there. Put in those terms, we can see that that, in itself, is a bit limited. If I can't see you, you aren't there. Babies are supposed to grow out of thinking that at about nine months. If I don't see oncoming traffic, it's not there. You wouldn't want to be driving on a twisty mountain road with someone who operates this way. There is so much that we don't know, can't know. Best if we join our voice to that of Einstein, and Thomas Aquinas for that matter – asserting that “what is impenetrable to us really exists, manifesting itself as highest wisdom and the most radiant beauty.” Our faith positions us in relation to all that we cannot fathom. So we must develop the ears to hear this and other stories in a way that is neither naively literalistic, nor naively self-confident about the state of our knowledge.

Peter's answer to the charge that his stories are cleverly devised myths is not surprising. No, this happened, I saw it with my own eyes ... but that too leaves us unsatisfied, because it is his experience, not ours, that he is talking about. We can stay with Peter, though, when he insists that experience has to be the litmus test. Instead of narrowing our sense of who God might be, let's expand it. Not a big guy, but a mother, a rock, an ocean, a mystery.

In our recent faith Exploration group, Emily shared these words of Jean Little, who writes this way About God

When people talk to me about God, I usually listen.
It's the easiest thing to do and it's polite.
There's also always the chance that I might learn something,
But, so far, it's mostly been just a list of names.

I know about God, the Lord, my refuge and my strength,
Jehovah, Yahweh, and the Holy Spirit,
Our-Father-Which-Art-In-Heaven-
Hallowed-Be-Thy-Name,
The one that's always blessing you when you sneeze,
God on a cloud, God on a throne and God in a burning bush.

I've heard him called a Shepherd - and a Lamb.
He walked in the Garden of Eden, but nobody's seen him.
He lives in heaven. He saves you from your sins.
No, no He's here in us. He's really a spirit.
Or is He Love? Or is He a still small voice?

Whatever else they say, they insist He's one.
(Or three in One?) But he sounds like a crowd to me.
Whoever he is, we have nothing to do with each other.
I've never met him. I don't think he's around
the places I hang out. Or, if He is,
He never speaks.

But ... sometimes, when I'm afraid, I guess I pray.
I gasp, "Don't let it get me!" or "Please, help me"
It isn't a thing I plan.
The words just come. And I am braver.
Not every time. Not so it's something sure.
But often enough for me to wonder why ...or who ..

And when I see somebody hurt - and I can't help -
A father downtown slapping his little boy,
those people who haunt the News with starving eyes,
children wounded ... or lost ... and nobody, nobody listens! ...
I feel an anger greater than my anger.
I know a pity that is outside myself,
A pity that never turns away and forgets.
I rest in a sorrow too deep to understand.
This might be God. I think I hope it is.
And there are moments when I see something lovely
just sunlight, maybe, lying along the road -
and nobody's there to tell, but someone sees.
And the moments when I think up a private joke,
too silly to say aloud or too all my own ...
there's always somebody there to share it with.
Maybe it's only myself. It might be God.

Whether you're God or not, I'm glad you're there.
I wouldn't call you Thou or He,
but then, I think you're tired of the jumble of Holy names
and I'm certain you don't waste time on thrones or sneezes.

(Hey World, Here I Am, KidsCanPress, 1990, adjusted for inclusive language)

It's possible we aren't going to solve the problem of God today.

There is a quiet intimacy among Jesus and his three friends as they descend the mountain after the splendid and terrifying vision. They agree it is better not to talk about it for the moment. But ever since, no one has stopped. Amen.