

February 14, 2010
Transfiguration Sunday
 Exodus 34:29-35
 2 Corinthians 3:12 - 4:2
 Luke 9:28-36
 “Awesome!”

In the grand cycle of the liturgical – that is, the church – year, there are some special days which come along on which it is a pleasure to preach. For instance, there is the joy of preaching about Jesus’ birth, or the empty grave on Easter morning, or the amazing energy burst that was the birthday of the church on Pentecost. And then, there is Transfiguration Sunday. A day which apparently, according to some internet blogs I checked, has come to be known as “T-fig Sunday.” A day on which, as it turns out, many pastors would just as soon have the day off.

Actually, in my first few years as a pastor, I enjoyed preaching on this Sunday because it was all new to me and a fresh challenge. Now, however, after having preached every year for seven years on this Sunday, I found myself wondering what on earth I could say that was new and fresh. I struggle with this strange story which comes up every year on the Sunday before Lent begins.

After pondering and researching and pondering some more during the past week, I finally admitted the truth to myself as I am about to admit it to you now. I think my problem with this text is that the story itself just seems so strange, so unearthly, so utterly incredible. How can I preach it, I thought, if I’m not even sure if I believe it myself?

On Wednesday evening I was doing some more research on the internet when one of my all-time favorite authors came to my rescue. Her name is Madeleine L’Engle. She is a novelist and a poet who is equally entranced by the world of science and the world of the imagination. If her name sounds familiar, perhaps you or your children may have read her Newbery Prize winning book *A Wrinkle in Time*, a book which combines science fiction and theology in an engaging adventure. With her poet’s imagination, she starts off a sermon about this text by talking about how this and other wonderful passages from the Bible move us from fact into myth.

Myth. That’s a word we get nervous about when it comes to talking about the Bible. Even if we don’t believe that every single word of the Bible is literally true – what some people refer to as “inerrant” – we aren’t too sure that we want to question the content of those books of the Bible which are the core of our faith, the gospels.

Years ago, when I was part of a several year long study of the Bible at the Riverside church, our associate pastor, Jay Groat, challenged us to confront this very issue. At the time, he gave us a quote from a fourth century philosopher named Salustius, who said “Myths are things that never happened but always are.”¹

In other words, myths may not be factually true in a literal, scientific or historical sense, but they point us to *truth*, to a reality which is more important to the human soul than any mathematical proof or historical factoid could ever be.

The story of the transfiguration of Jesus takes place as part of a longer narrative. It begins eight days before the events on the mountaintop, with Jesus having a discussion with his disciples. He asks them “What are people saying about me? Who do they think I am?” They tell him that some are saying that he is John the Baptist, or a reincarnation of the prophet Elijah or one of the other ancient prophets. Then Jesus asks the more pointed question: “But who do *you* say that I am?” Peter gives the correct answer: “The Messiah of God.” And then Jesus goes on to talk about what that really means – that he will suffer and be killed and then raised on the third day. To be his follower means walking the same path that he will walk, a path of sacrifice and struggle and pain. Peter has given the right answer, but he still doesn’t understand what that answer really truly means.

So then we have this story about a trip up a mountain to pray. The three disciples fall asleep – perhaps foreshadowing their time with Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane – not realizing that Jesus had begun to glow with a glorious, unearthly light, and then the figures of Moses and Elijah appear, as Madeleine L’Engle put it, “breaking ordinary chronology into a million fragments.”²

This is the point where I dig in my heels and say, “Whoa! Wait a minute!” If the story had just been about Jesus suddenly glowing as he prayed, I could deal with it. Even adding in the cloud descending and the voice of God thundering at the stunned disciples is OK – I can relate it to the voice of God speaking as Jesus emerged from his baptism in the River Jordan. But when you add in this mystical appearance of the two greatest prophets of Judaism.... well, it stretches the limits of my imagination. And maybe, just maybe, that’s exactly what it is supposed to do.

Many years ago I worked with a woman who was very into astrology. She used a computer program to figure out my star chart, and came up with something interesting. As it turns out, I had something like the sun and five planets in the sign of Leo the Lion, which meant that I should have great leadership potential. But I also had the moon in Aquarius, which according to her reference book was the “Mr. Spock” moon, belonging to someone very analytical, who values the judgments of reason and logic over the judgments of the heart.

I don’t really believe in astrology, but I do have to admit that there are many times when I experience this “heart vs. head” battle. I think it has to do less with the stars and the planets and more to do with the way our culture works, seeking to find scientific, factual explanations instead of allowing mystery, story and yes, myth, to engage our very souls. Madeleine L’Engle said this about the story of the transfiguration:

“Strong stuff. Mythic stuff. That stuff which makes life worth living, which lies on the other side of provable fact. How can we be Christians without understanding this? The incarnation itself bursts out of the bounds of reason. That the power which created all of the galaxies, all of the stars in all of their courses, should willingly limit that power in order to be one of us, and all

for love of us, cannot be understood in terms of laboratory proof, but only of love. And it is that love which calls us to move beyond the limited world of fact and into the glorious world of love itself. Of Jesus standing with Moses and Elijah, both of whom had themselves stood on the mount and been illuminated by God's glory. When Moses went down from the mountain his face was so brilliant that people could not bear to look on him, and he had to cover his face in order not to blind them. The brilliance of God is indeed blinding, and we need myth, story, to help us bear the light.”³

When it comes to our beliefs about Jesus, our understanding of who he was and what it means to be his disciples, there are myriad ways of seeing him. My mother, who attended church regularly and even taught Sunday School, finally confessed to me when I was an adult that she had never believed in a divine Jesus the Christ. For her, Jesus was a profoundly wise teacher who instructed us in how to lead a good, ethical life. Like Thomas Jefferson, who cut out all of Jesus' miracles in his revision of the Gospels, she had no interest in stories like the transfiguration. Her interest was in the Jesus who taught about feeding the hungry and sheltering the homeless.

On the other hand, there are people like one of my seminary classmates who claimed that she needed to have a “God of the Omnis” – omnipotent, omniscient. Someone with ultimate power and authority; someone on whom she could count to be always in control of everything.

When it comes to Jesus, most of the time I think of him being in the midst of the human condition. When I watched the terrible scenes of destruction of Haiti on CNN the day after the earthquake, my only comfort was in my belief that Jesus was there with those trapped in the tumbled buildings, or those who were suffering with injuries and no available medical help, or the children who wandered the streets, dazed and frightened. My vision of Jesus is someone who has the infinite capacity to love and care for all of us, no matter what our need.

But my picture of Jesus cannot be complete without the scene on the mountaintop. It reminds me that our God is indeed an awesome God. Just as Jesus is my mother's good teacher, he is also my friend's “God of the Omnis” – the Word of God made flesh, the Prince of Peace, Immanuel, God with us. As the Gospel of John tells us, “All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people.” What has come into being in him was not only life, but life eternal.

And so I've come to realize that it is good to kneel, awestruck, with Peter, James and John once a year, contemplating the glory of the transcendent Christ; to ponder in silence afterward what all this means as we make our way into the valley of the shadow which is Lent. As Peter said, “Master, it is good for us to be here!”

Amen, alleluia, amen.

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¹[http://books.google.com/books?id=-HDpA-oKy3cC&pg=PA72&lpg=PA72&dq=salustius+myth+true&source=bl&ots=nLYO_NopfJ&sig=PHOgY5ikOXZGSQuWkA9u6c_4fCE&hl=en&ei=7HpzS-](http://books.google.com/books?id=-HDpA-oKy3cC&pg=PA72&lpg=PA72&dq=salustius+myth+true&source=bl&ots=nLYO_NopfJ&sig=PHOgY5ikOXZGSQuWkA9u6c_4fCE&hl=en&ei=7HpzS-3YLIWINt6PsewJ&sa=X&oi=book_result&ct=result&resnum=4&ved=0CBEQ6AEwAw#)

[3YLIWINt6PsewJ&sa=X&oi=book_result&ct=result&resnum=4&ved=0CBEQ6AEwAw#](http://www.csec.org/csec/sermon/l'engle_3501.htm)

²http://www.csec.org/csec/sermon/l'engle_3501.htm

³Ibid.