

March 6, 2011 / Transfiguration of Jesus / David L. Edwards

Lent and the Inward Journey

2 Peter 1:16-21

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.

Matthew 17:1-9

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."

The readings from Matthew and Second Peter invite us to enter the season of Lent with a renewed practice of the inward journey. Making time each day to be inwardly quiet, we grow in awareness of our lives in relation to God, other people, the world around us, and ourselves. These days our society and world are awash in violence and injustice. We can observe in ourselves and others that when we do not practice awareness and self-examination, our actions become instruments of our own egos, driven by anger, hunger for power, fear, greed. The most radical thing we can do is to go back to silence and inner listening. It is the gateway back to our humanity. Lent is more important than ever as a season of renewed spiritual practice, not in order to be religious, but to be human the way God created us to be.

In the gospel story, Jesus takes three disciples up a mountain. Jesus' appearance is transformed--face shining like the sun, clothes dazzling white. These are images of a life close to God, transparent to God's reality, presence, and purposes. Moses and Elijah appear, and are talking with Jesus. They represent the law and the prophets, the core heritage of Israel. Their presence confirms Jesus' importance.

Peter feels compelled to talk: "Wow, Jesus, this is really something! How about let's build three booths for you, Elijah and Moses. Let's memorialize this moment and make it last forever." Have you ever had this kind of experience? You are with some other people. Something really special happens, one of those moments when the sacred dimension of life is experienced by everyone present. Then someone feels it necessary to talk about it! The awed silence is suddenly spattered with words. Some experiences are to be simply received, not contaminated with words, with our compulsive talking.

Peter's impulse to "capture the moment" by building the booths is familiar behavior. We want to preserve special experiences, make them last. Nothing about life is permanent. Attempts to nail down and hang onto experiences or events always fail. We get stuck in the past, or try to repeat the past in the present. The life of faith is not about enshrining spiritual experiences, but being awake and aware of God's presence and movements in the here and now, and toward the future. Our community uses the word journey a lot to describe the life of faith. If we take that seriously, it means learning how to be present and aware in each moment, not clinging to the past or imposing past experiences on the present. It means letting go so that we can be open to God's presence and movements in and among us. It is about really "listening to Jesus," and that is where the story is moving.

Suddenly a cloud envelopes them all. Out of the cloud comes a voice: "This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!" This is the center of the story, the divine confirmation of Jesus as one whose life is full of God. This is the whole reason for the dazzling special effects--the mountaintop, the radiant clothes, the cloud, all of it. Listen to him! That has been the problem up until now. The disciples have not been listening to Jesus. They hear what he is saying, but it does not sink in. It does not take root in their lives. They are too full of their own ideas of who he is or who they think he should be. They have not really been paying attention.

God does not call us to be full of ideas or talk, but to listen. Listening is the foundation of the life of faith. Do you know that the word "obedience" has its root in "to listen"? First listening, then doing. Doing is shaped by listening. The outward is shaped by the inward. Obedience is not about a bunch of doing, about activism. It is not a rote following of rules, religious or otherwise. Obedience as spiritual practice means that we first of all listen. Then we do what we hear, what we are truly called to do.

Then Elijah, Moses, and the cloud disappear. The disciples are cringing in fear. Characteristically Jesus comes over to them, lifts them up, and tells them not to be afraid. As they walk back down the mountain, Jesus tells the disciples to say nothing about what they have seen. This is odd. When we have some kind of religious experience, we want to tell everyone. You know, get all excited, tell everyone about Jesus! Christianity has been a very talkative religion, filled with words. We confuse being a religion of the living Word of God with being a wordy religion. Here at the beginning of Lent, we have Jesus' call to silence about the deepest meaning and unfolding of his life. Jesus says to keep quiet about it until the "son of man is raised from the dead." We can easily get it wrong without

seeing the whole story. The rest of Jesus' teachings and ministry. His suffering. His giving up of power. His death at the hands of those seeking power. The surprising mystery of his resurrection, that his life is not snuffed out by death at the hands of those caught up in political and religious power and control. When Christians are not listening to but talking a lot about Jesus, they, we get caught up in things that have nothing to do with Jesus-- violence, nationalism, material prosperity, war, the promotion of hate and fear. This is my beloved son; listen to him!

The Tao te Ching, written five or six centuries before our Christian scriptures, says something with which I think Jesus would agree: *Those who talk do not know, and those who know do not talk.* It is the same thing here. Knowing--not in your head, but in the core of your being--is more important than talking. Our talking too often reveals that we really do not know what we are talking about, or that we are trying to convince ourselves that we know something. Jesus once said, "Why do you call me 'Lord, Lord,' and do not do what I ask you?(Lk. 6:46)" He was supremely interested in our LIVING as God's people, as those becoming aware of God's reign, God's kingdom, in the midst of life, and living our lives in harmony with it. What we call the inward journey is the daily practice of the kind of silence and awareness that leads us to such knowledge, such insight, and such living.

It is at this point I was struck by the reading from 2 Peter. The writer refers to the transfiguration event. We were there, he says. We heard the voice. We saw it happen. This confirms what the writer sees as the absolute importance of looking to Jesus, listening to Jesus, letting Jesus become the central focus of our lives. That is the prophetic message the writer is talking about. "Prophetic" means a message, a truth from God. Peter is saying that the most important message for us is the importance of Jesus, who he is and what he has to teach us as one who is so close to God, whose life is so transparent to God.

Then comes this marvelous sentence: *You will do well to be attentive to this [message, Jesus] as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts.* I don't know exactly what the writer originally meant by this beautiful sentence, but to me it is a wonderful image of contemplative living, living that is grounded in listening to Jesus. It is what we literally do when we sit in a place we have chosen as our meditative space. We may light a candle, a reminder of God and God's presence. We do this, too, on Sundays when we gather here in silence, with a candle burning before us, in our presence. We sit long enough to let our minds and hearts settle down, become quieter. Then we can begin to listen, becoming attentive to and aware of

what is going on around us as well as inside us. In this way, we are becoming receptive to God's voice and call in our lives. The day dawns, and the morning star of our life in God rises in our hearts.

The writer is not saying, "Look what a great experience WE had back then! You must have that same experience of that same event!" He is saying, "Pay attention to this message about Jesus, and to the living Christ himself, just as you would look at a lamp shining in a darkened room. Keep contemplating this light, this message, this life until the day dawns and the morning star that heralds the new day rises in your own hearts." The writer does not say that the day MIGHT dawn and the morning star MIGHT rise in your hearts. He says UNTIL the day dawns for you and the morning star rises in your heart. These are such encouraging words to us about our spiritual practice! As dark as the room may be, as faint as the lamp may shine, the light will dawn in us. If we keep at it, we will experience the reality of our lives in God. This happens as we look to Jesus, as we contemplate with quiet minds and hearts the fullness of his life. Jesus' transfiguration has to do with our transfiguration. The words spoken to Jesus become words spoken to us: "You are my beloved child, with whom I am well pleased." That, to me, is the morning star rising in our hearts. It is the dawning of our true life as those who are created and loved by God.

Silence and contemplation are a hard sell these days, even in the church. Even among us here, where we talk a great deal about the importance of the inward journey, actually working with our daily prayer life is the greatest challenge. We want to get on with the outward, and see the inward only as the launching pad for our actions, for what we have already decided to do. This is why I suppose I talk more about the inward journey than the outward, because it is the easiest to avoid and diminish in importance. Yet it is essential to the outward.

A minister shared with me her struggles with her congregation. The people simply could not understand why she emphasized the importance of the spiritual life. They objected to her taking time for her own spiritual growth and were not at all interested in their own. They see themselves doing good things, she said. Visiting a nursing home. Working in the food bank. And so forth. But what they don't see is their own need to come alive to their relationship with God through Jesus, to deepen and grow in their discipleship. You know what? This person moved on according to the deep listening to her own heart, her own life, her own sense of calling. She eventually left that congregation, without rancor, and stepped out in the following of that call. Now a few years later, she

seems to have found the fulfillment of that call. She is doing fulfilling work she could not have imagined at the start of her search, her journey. The day dawns. The morning star rises in our hearts, in our lives. If we pay attention. If we become inwardly quiet and listening.

God in Jesus calls us not just to do good things but to be persons who live close to God. There is much change that is needed in our world, filling us with a sense of urgency and sometimes despair. And yet it takes more than our well-intended actions to make a difference. It takes changed people, transfigured people whose hearts and minds are on God and their relationship with God. It takes people who are sent, who are called. And for that to happen, the practice of silence, listening, and contemplation is essential.

Let us together make this season of Lent a time of renewed inward journey. Let us pay closer attention to Jesus, listening to him, as to a lamp shining in a dark place. As we do so, the day will dawn and the morning star will rise in our hearts.