

Blinded by the Light (Transfigured!)

Feb. 22, 2009

Rev. David C. Huffman

Mt. 17:1-9

Have you ever had the hair on the back of your neck stand up? I mean *really* stand up. When you are walking your dog and you encounter another dog, chances are the hair on your dog's back will stand up and his tail will go up. This is nature's way of making a dog look *bigger* to other dogs; it is a defense mechanism intended to make the potential aggressor think the other dog is bigger than he is and back down. Cats do something similar: in addition to their hair standing up, they arch their backs to look taller.

Back in 1974, against my better judgment, I went to see the movie *The Exorcist*. When Linda Blair's head did several 360's, and she emitted bright green projectile vomit and spoke with the voice of the devil, the hair on the back of my neck stood straight up. I can remember trying to make it lay down again with my hands but it wouldn't. To put it mildly, I was scared out of my mind. It was a traumatic moment that I didn't care to repeat and that made me yearn for the days of *Old Yeller* and *Bambi*.

I

I think the disciples had a *similar* experience on top of that mountain when they saw Jesus talking with the ghosts of Moses and Elijah. Let me give you a little *context* here. Jesus had been conducting his ministry for about three years, and the time had come for him to set his face toward Jerusalem where he would have to deal with the cross. In the passage just before today's, Jesus asks his disciples at Caesarea Philippi who he was. Peter got the answer right when he said, "the Messiah, the Son of the Living God." He got the right *title* but he didn't understand the *job description*, because when Jesus told them that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer and die, Peter grabbed Jesus and vehemently said, "Say it isn't so!" That's when Jesus called Peter *Satan*. Jesus frequently didn't mince words.

So Jesus felt the need to take his inner circle, Peter, James and John, to the mountain top for a little *spiritual retreat* and a teaching moment. Have you ever been on the top of a mountain? Remember how breathtaking it is when you first arrived and saw this incredible view of surrounding countryside? We say things like "Wow! Look at that beautiful view! I can't believe how high up we are. Look at all those people down there; they look like little ants from

here!” That is why we use mountains as a *metaphor* for close encounters with God; we call them *mountaintop experiences*.

But very quickly the experience went from euphoric to *spooky* when the disciples saw Jesus standing and talking with the ghosts of Moses and Elijah, who had been dead for 1200 and 900 years, respectively. Peter was so dumbfounded that he wanted to stay and savor the moment. He offered to pitch three tents, one for Jesus and his two guests. And then the mood switched from spooky to *terrifying* when from a cloud the booming voice of God said, “This is my beloved son, with whom I am well pleased. Listen to him!” This is where their hair stands up. The disciples fell on their faces in utter fear. I don’t blame them. I think I would have too.

But Jesus, taking control as he always did, walks over to the disciples and touches them, telling them in a calm voice to get up and not to be afraid. When they got up Moses and Elijah were gone, Jesus’ face and clothes had returned to normal, and the moment was over – just like that. Jesus took them back to town where there was still much ministry to be done. The problem with going to Montreat or Massanetta Springs for an exhilarating spiritual retreat is that we have to come back home and go back to work and school on Monday where life is so mundane and ordinary. Don’t you hate that? Somehow, I think the trick is to be able to take a little of the mountaintop with us in our hearts to keep us going. As Humphrey Bogart told Ingrid Bergman in *Casa Blanca*, “We’ll always have Paris.”

II

What’s going on here? What does this story have to teach us? Maybe it teaches us that we all need a little *mystery*, *awe*, and *wonder* in our lives. The routine of work, school, and life can become very mundane and ordinary, causing us to become jaded and cynical. And we can develop a “been there, done that” attitude, so that nothing excites us or gives us wonder. Last week as I was leaving the church to go home at the end of the day, as I made my way through the courtyard I looked up and saw five deer standing by the garden about twenty-five feet in front of me. They had been grazing, and I was on auto pilot walking a course I have walked five days a week for the past 18 years when by chance we came face to face.

Now, I had two choices. I could have just continued walking toward them and they would have turned and run back into the woods. Or, I could have stopped in my tracks and been very still and *marveled* at this chance encounter with something very beautiful. Now, mind you, I have seen deer hundreds of times. In fact, I see these deer at least two or three times a week.

They are our *church deer* who live in the woods nearby. They come out to graze early in the morning and at dusk. But they usually keep their distance. But that day we stood face to face, the closest I have ever been to deer without a fence or glass between us. So I chose the latter option and just froze, and so did they. We must have stared at each other for about 2 or 3 minutes.

In that moment I gave thanks to God for such beautiful creatures, and wondered what they were thinking. Probably, “Does he have a gun? Is he going to hurt us?” Or maybe “No, this is a church, silly; they plant bushes and flowers for us to eat all the time. They are our friends.” After a few minutes, they wagged their tails and moved back to a safer distance, just in case I might be packing heat. We looked at each for another 3 or 4 minutes before they turned and ambled back to the woods, and I walked to my car, feeling as if I had just received a wonderful gift, let into another world for a brief glimpse of God’s amazing world.

Do you ever have *moments* like that, when you are given a *brief glimpse* into the incredible majesty and beauty of God’s good earth and life? We need more moments like that. Maybe that is why we come to church, *not* to hear a lecture about the importance of being good boys and girls, but to get a glimpse into the heart and mind of God, to be dazzled by the gospel that insists that the Creator of the Universe and the Designer of the Alps and the Grand Canyon actually cares about us and loves us with an unconditional and infinite love – that the One who set the stars and planets on their courses knows us by name and wants us to experience joy and peace in a world that frequently seems totally *indifferent* to us.

Maybe that’s why Jesus took the disciples to the mountaintop, and maybe that is why God gives us such moments. Maybe that’s why the Spirit led Moses to Mount Sinai where he saw the burning bush and had to take off his shoes and look the other way because he was standing on holy ground and gazing upon God directly was too much for his human eyes. Could be.

III

A fellow alum (cfsandy@gmail.com) at Princeton Seminary sends out an e-mail every Friday called *52 Best Friday Stories*. In the subtitle it says, “If God has a refrigerator, your picture is on it.” Isn’t that a great concept? Last week’s story is about a man named Carl. He was retired, 87 years old, a wounded War World II veteran, and a widower. He saw a notice at his church for a volunteer to care for the garden behind the minister’s house and took the job.

The neighborhood had been changing and the crime rate was on the rise, so his fellow church members were concerned about Carl's safety.

One day as he was watering the garden three teenaged boys came up and started taunting him; Carl didn't react, he just smiled and offered them some water from the hose. They attacked him, beat him, and stole his retirement watch and wallet. When the minister came to his rescue, Carl didn't seem too upset. He just said, "Punks; I hope one day they wise up." A few weeks later, they returned and roughed him up again. Again, Carl just smiled and offered them a drink from the garden hose. But Carl was not deterred. He continued to care for the garden everyday.

A few days later, someone walked up behind Carl, startling him and causing him to lurch forward and fall into a bush. Carl noticed the tattoos on his hands and realized that he was one of the three who had beaten and robbed him. But this time he wasn't there to *harm* him but to *apologize*. He told him how he couldn't sleep at night because each time they had attacked him instead of retaliating he had been kind to them offering them water. So he handed him a dirty paper bag with his watch and wallet inside, with all the money. He told him that since he had not answered their hatred with hatred of his own that it had caused him to turn his life around. He had stopped running with the gang and was trying to straighten out his life. Carl was pleased and amazed.

Later that winter Carl died, and at the funeral the minister eulogized him with words of gratitude and praise. A young man with tattoos and scars on his hands sat at the back row alone. A few weeks later a flier went up saying, "Carl's Garden needs a new gardener." A few weeks later, a young man showed up in the minister's office with the flier in his tattooed and scarred hands asking for the job. The minister recognized him and said, "You take good care of Carl's garden and honor him with your work. He spent the next several years working hard growing flowers and vegetables just as Carl had. He went to college, got married, and became an upstanding member of the community.

A few years later, he came to see the new minister and told him that he was going to have to quit his job taking care of Carl's garden. His wife had just given birth to a new boy, and he was going to have to spend his extra time at home taking care of their new son. The minister thanked him for his years of service told him that Carl would be proud of him. As the young man turned to leave, the minister asked him what they had named their new son. "Carl," he replied.

We never know when we are going to stumble upon Jesus talking with Moses and Elijah, or stand face to face with a bevy of deer, or encounter grace in someone who refuses to fight fire with fire. We never know when those *rare moments* of mystery, awe, and wonder will give us another glimpse into the mind and heart of God. So, maybe when they happen we should savor them, enjoy them, and tuck them away into our hearts for a rainy day or a dry spell. Now, as Jesus would suggest, it's just about time to *leave* this mountaintop and head back to town, where there is much work for us to do. Let us pray.