

KGL+

Sermon

Trinity Church Boston

Last Epiphany, year C

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts together always be acceptable in your sight, O God our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

Everyone has a movie that they can watch over and over again—until you don’t even need to watch it really. A particular favorite of those kinds of movies of mine is *Miss Congeniality*. I love almost every scene with Michael Caine in it. Caine plays a grumpy beauty pageant consultant, and in the movie is tasked with transforming an unlikely FBI agent into a plausible contestant, much to both of their chagrins. The scene I love the best in the movie, and which I quote all too often is when the FBI agent (played Sandra Bullock) steps onto the stage for the interview portion. Michael Caine holds his head in his hands when they ask her a planted question about pageants being portrayed as anti-feminist. To everyone’s surprise, Bullock answers the clearly pointed question with aplomb and charming self-deprecation, and Michael Caine, who had just been holding his head in his hands when he heard the question asked, now looks around, eyes shining, and says overwhelmed, “My God. I did it!”¹

But then Sandra Bullock keeps talking, taking her delightful answer into a less-than-veiled threat to hunt down anyone who would hurt her friends at the pageant, which confuse the judges and confound the audience into a confused silence.

“A brief shining moment, and then that mouth,” Caine mutters, head in hands again.

“A brief shining moment, and then that mouth.”

That’s a not hugely inaccurate description of this morning’s gospel from Luke. For those of you who notice such things, the final Sunday before the season of Lent is when we, every single year, hear the story of the Transfiguration: Jesus on the mountaintop with three of his disciples and in that moment he is transformed into, as the Greek in Luke says, something ‘other’². He shines, he gleams, his skin becomes that of a Get-Ready-With-Me social media influencer,³ and in that moment, even when the disciples are interestingly weighed down with sleep, he is flanked by Moses and Elijah.

Overwrought, Peter offers to make them each a dwelling on that mountain—Peter, also a perfect example of the phrase, ‘A brief shining moment, and then that mouth’, both offers hospitality to

¹ This is just one of so many amazing scenes from the movie, and you can find the whole scene referenced here: <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=327798894521768>. But also, you should just Netflix it on a Friday night if you haven’t already.

² Just a note: the word ‘transfiguration’ isn’t used in this story in the Gospel of Luke (Gk: metamorpheo). Jesus became ‘hetero’ (other) is the actual Greek translation in 9:29, which is rendered in our NRSV as ‘changed’. This version of the mountaintop is actually very curtailed as opposed to the other gospel versions (Mark, for instance, is unexpectedly much longer than this version, a rarity in the usually pithy author’s work).

³ #GRWM is a trend on social media platforms and highlights people getting ready for a night out, or work, or just their skincare routine. It’s both super offputting and addictive at the same time. Learn more [here](#).

the holy trio, and perhaps there is something else at play here—a wish or a hope that all three might stay for a while; keep them all company together.

But this year, the story takes a turn, with the scripture which follows upon its heels: that of a man, calling to Jesus and asking him to heal his only son.

Literarily, it's a strange turn in Luke's narrative. The shininess of the mountaintop; the chaos down below. Apparently the other nine disciples—all of whom had been given the power of healing by Jesus only a few verses before and told to go out into the towns and share this gift—they were unable to heal this child.⁴ The man calls out to Jesus, saying as much, and describing the boy's ailments, all of them terrifying to a parent, and honestly, unsettling to a community.

And Jesus loses his cool. In one of the most umbrage-bearing responses from Jesus in scripture, he yells, "You faithless and perverse generation, how much longer must I be with you and put up with you?" And then tells the man to bring his son to him. Even on his way to Jesus, the boy convulses once again, his demon throwing the boy to the ground, one final spiteful wrench before Jesus heals the boy and sends him back to his father.

And at the end of the whole pericope, the end of the drowsy disciples⁵ and Jesus constantly referring to his own demise and death, the shining and poorly framed invitations for Moses and Elijah to stay for the weekend; at the end when they all come down from the dark cloud which has overshadowed Jesus and returned to discover the failure of the disciples to successfully heal the child, the echo of the crowds throws us one more curveball: 'And all were astounded at the greatness of God.'⁶

If the purpose of these scriptures and the Transfiguration according to Luke is to impress us with the glory of God, in my own opinion, as someone editorially inclined, it would have been more effective to just leave out all the weird and uncomfortable parts of the story—tightening it up, and skipping over the downer parts that appear highlighted. Omit Moses and Elijah and Jesus spending their precious time together talking about impending death in Jerusalem; giving the disciples a bit more credit, or, even, Jesus a smidge more patience.

It would have been a better story if we stayed on that mountaintop, blissful in the glory of the moment. Peter was all ready for this, tents in hand.

But Peter does not. We do not. We cannot. Because even time on the mountaintop cannot insulate us from the depths of the ordinary; our heartache; the grief.

We, and I include myself in this 'we', can fall too easily into a complacent faith which attributes ease and tidiness to the presence of God. Maybe we've all said to ourselves once or twice or

⁴ Cf. Luke 9:1-6

⁵ Since this is the second time I mention it in the sermon, the disciples are described as being overcome with sleep, which is a strange description. My thought is that perhaps it makes more sense when put next to the Garden of Gethsemane, and the disciples were unable to stay awake as Jesus asked of them. So, the disciples on the ground (and off the mountain), were failing by their lack of faith inhibiting healing of the boy; and the disciples on the mountain were similarly failing by their inability to be present or awake to the Transfiguration. As many things go with exegesis, this is my best guess, and it might have nothing to do with each other at all!

⁶ Luke 9:43a

several hundred times, ‘I’ll know this is okay/ meant to be/ the right choice if XYZ all fall into place and come together.’ That the presence of accomplishment and ‘it all working out’ is actually a signal of divine favor and presence. That God’s glory is somehow isolated from reality or disappointment.

But it’s not. The scriptures this morning, as we are on the precipice of the wilderness⁷, do not point us to the light of the mountain, but to the affirmation of the crowds below. In the midst of glory we are pointed to the cross. As God spoke to the disciples, a terrifying cloud came over the whole of the mountain. As Jesus returned to his ministry, he discovers that the faith of his disciples was not great enough to heal, as he had sent them out to do.

And Jesus himself gets all-too-humanly irritated at all of this— ‘Must I do everything?!’ he cries.

It’s messy, these scriptures. The clarity of Jesus’ divine nature of the Transfiguration isn’t crystal. There’s glory and agony and disappointment all throughout. A brief shining moment, and then reality.

So where is the Good News? When I search for it this week, I keep thinking of those crowds, and their final astonishment at the greatness of God.

It’s a mixed-up gospel today, and we don’t like lack of clarity when it comes to God’s presence or intent. There is delight and revelation and overwhelm and grief and desperation all in one place, and we assume God doesn’t work in that way.

But here we all are, together. Each with our own joys, and fears and overwhelm and exhaustion and hopes. We are a messy place of intersections right here, right now. You may have come here this morning with the suspicion that God is far from you, and sitting next to you might be someone who is confident that God is speaking to them in deep and profound ways in this season. One person holding grief and fear sits next to the person who is holding a bursting joy and anticipation. The manifestation of God and God’s presence in the work of the Transfiguration is a deep alignment of exaltation and humiliation⁸; of glory and agony; of promise and despair, all mixed together, because every time we come into this place, the Church, the Body of Christ echoes the body of Christ himself.

When we are on the mountaintop, we still need to be present to those in the valley. Because when we are in the valley, we will need those on the mountaintop to be our eyes of hope.

This is why we do this. This is why we gather together, and this practice of holding one another in both the joy and pain every week is to affirm that we don’t only understand God as being in the highlights, but God’s presence is indeed part of our interwoven existence encompassing all parts of the spectrum. To imagine that God exists only when it all aligns is to limit God. As the

⁷ Liturgically speaking, as we look forward to the Church season of Lent. Scripturally, Jesus has gone in, through and out of the wilderness in Chapter 4.

⁸ My Old Testament professor in Divinity School told us that the entirety of those scriptures could be summed up in this phrase: “My humiliation is my exaltation, and my exaltation is my humiliation,” so the phrase is not mine, but also it’s not trademarked either. One of our final exam questions was to take this phrase and apply it to several books of the OT. I think it can apply as well to a good portion of the New Testament as Jesus was a good Jew.

people respond today, in the midst of a failed healing, the disappointment of the disciples and the ire of Jesus himself, still—the people acclaimed the greatness of God.

If God can still work through that, and with those reactions, then we also need to acknowledge that God can and will and does work through the depths of all we bring to this space and this place every week, so that we can continue to be there for those in the pews with us, both during our mountaintop joys and our all-too-real griefs and concerns.

Because perhaps, we can be—we are-- the mountaintop for one another, friends.

Filled with shining moments and missteps, and heading towards the wilderness.

But filled together, thanks to the greatness of God.

Amen.