

Pain and Glory

What do we make of this strange story – the Transfiguration of Our Lord?

It is a very strange story indeed.

Some say it's a nice tale of religious make-believe, while others call it a vision, an hallucination.

We modern folks aren't that comfortable when the unexplainable pulls up a chair at our dinner table.

Maybe because so many see life as little more than a never-ending to-do list, checking off tasks accomplished – only to wake up the next day and do it all over again.

The mystery of our lives, of each other, of creation, can become flattened by our routines, as mystery disappears in the glare of the ordinary.

This absence of mystery was loud and clear during a recent interview of a well known businesswoman who was talking about her experience with breast cancer.

She spoke of the fear that cancer brings.

Of the helpful and hurtful things people say; about her hair loss, the chemo, the anxiety.

Until finally she's asked one last question.

“Did your experience with this disease change you?”

And there’s this really long silence.

Finally followed by:

“No.”

Then more silence.

“Because if I say ‘yes,’ I’ll have to get mystical, and I won’t do that.

So no, breast cancer didn’t change me.

I’m cancer free now, back at work, back to my life.”

I have to tell you, her answer truly floored me.

How can you come nose to nose with your own mortality — and not be changed?

And I wondered if that highly educated, articulate woman was afraid, maybe even terrified, of the mysterious, of the unknowable in life?

In these Facebook, SnapChat times it seems our field of vision is becoming very small indeed.

If it can’t be captured on my iPhone, it must be fantasy or illusion.

It’s not just atheists who feel this way.

Avoiding mystery is quite common among those who claim Christ as their Lord.

Our fundamentalist friends avoid it with pat answers to all that life throws at us by pointing to this or that Bible verse.

Our liberal friends dismiss the unknown when they argue against the bodily resurrection of Jesus or deny the full humanity and divinity of Jesus.

“It’s enough that he was a good man,” they say.

My own sense is that we are terrified of mystery.

Because mystery rejects our tireless — yet fruitless efforts — to control people, places and things.

No wonder Jesus says this to his friends just before they’re confronted with the mystery of the transfiguration:

“You are not in the driver’s seat, I am!

Don’t run from suffering, embrace it!

Self-sacrifice is the way, my way, to finding yourself, your true self!” Mt 16:24–6. (The Msg. Tr.)

In the transfiguration, God tells us that the authentic life, the meaningful life, the life worth living, is encountered at the intersection of pain and glory.

That pain is wrapped in glory, just as glory is wrapped in pain.

Not that pain is something we want.

But if we are faithful followers of Jesus, people who seek peace even with our enemies, people who work for the justice that doesn't punish but restores, then there will be plenty of pain.

Because that life — is most unwelcome in this world.

These last many weeks we've eavesdropped on Jesus as he blesses life's losers.

As he changes the meaning of justice from "getting what you deserve" to "healing relationships."

We have listened in as Jesus brings the law not to an end, but to its full fruit and flower, engaging in the subversive activity of praying for those who want the worst for us.

It's subversive because forgiveness and risk and letting go disarms the vengeance and self-seeking our society is built on.

Watching Jesus walk up that hill with his three friends, you see only an ordinary Jew.

But there is something hiding beneath the glare of the ordinary.

Perhaps you've had the experience of standing above a bay or lagoon in the direct sunlight.

Because of the glare, you can only see the surface.

And then a cloud covers the sun — suddenly you can see straight to the bottom.

Seeing sights never seen before.

Because the glare of the ordinary has retreated, revealing fantastic things that are usually hidden.

That's what happens today with Jesus, as the cloud covers the sun.

And the depths, the mystery, of who Jesus is — comes suddenly, shockingly, into view.

The depths, the mystery, of Jesus reveal to those with eyes to see that glory and suffering are completely entwined, as an ordinary, dust covered Jew, heading for Jerusalem, heading for the cross, is transformed into one — who shines!

Too many who claim Christ as Lord see only the surface, they see only the obligation to be sure to attend to the rules and rituals.

But Jesus calls from his depths to our depths.

Urging us out of ourselves, and into service to one another.

The depths of Jesus call to us today as millions of migrants face horrific race-based sweeps with little regard for their humanity, while churches struggle with whether and how to provide sanctuary.

The depths of Jesus challenge us to ask why we have created a world in which 8 people own as much wealth as more than half the world's population.

The transfiguration of our Lord shines an unmistakable light on the intersection of pain and glory.

That intersection will appear again in six short weeks, as the one whose garments today shine like the sun — has those same garments divvied up by dice rolling soldiers.

As the one who speaks with Elijah today — will hear passersby jeeringly ask:

“where is Elijah now?!”

As the three men who witness the very presence of God on the mountaintop — sit quivering in a locked room — while three women stand at the foot of the cross.

As Peter's three booths — are replaced by three crosses.

The intersection between pain and glory, this is the central mystery of our lives.

We run from it to our peril.

Because to run from this intersection is to run from the very deepest meaning of life.

Which is this.

We are made in the image of God.

We exist in order to be co-creators with God.

A calling we so often surrender in exchange for safety and security.

Yet nevertheless, we are who we are, and God's will for us, our sacred destiny, will not be denied forever.

Never forget that in humanity, what began as a universe of unconscious matter has evolved into beings who can think and feel.

Beings capable of giving themselves away with love, freely, and for the benefit of one another. MacKinnon, *Mystery*, paraphrased.

It is self-giving that sets all of creation in motion, reflecting the outpouring of God's own self-giving that makes and sustains all things.

Jesus comes among us to teach us how to give back to God all that God gives to us.

Creating a sacred flow of giving and receiving.

Restoring our intimacy with, our trust in, our freedom in, this loving God who gives all – simply because it delights God to do so!

So that, no matter the circumstances of our lives, whether we walk the path of grief or of joy, we are always held securely in the palm of God's gloriously suffering hand. Id.

I have often wondered whether that well spoken cancer survivor thought more about the answer she gave in her interview.

Did she, in the days and weeks following her interview, return to the intersection of pain and glory?

And if so, in the returning, did she choose to surrender to mystery?

Opening herself to the vast unknown?

Opening herself to the compassionate womb
whom we call God?

And in that openness, did she discover that whenever we summon the courage to surrender to the mystery that enfolds us, that she too, at that very moment, like Jesus on the mountaintop, found herself, if only for a moment – shining!

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