

Exodus 34:29-35; 2 Corinthians 3:12-4:2; Luke 9:28-36

Despite today's temperatures, the reality is that we are now a little over half-way through winter and, this Wednesday, we begin the slow march to the cross known as Lent. When you walk down the streets of our city, or wander over into the nearby cemetery (as I oftentimes do), you experience the stark nakedness of the trees and the quiet of our surroundings. For many, this is a time filled with dread. The stock market is off, the temperatures are cold, and the news out of Washington and Springfield is enough to make one throw hands up in the air or curse the darkness. Instead of vision, what we get are words of recrimination and vituperation. Unceasing and incessant, words bombard us into a cacophony of ceaseless chatter. At such times, we long for respite—for a place apart, a mountain on which to retreat.

And today, that is just where we find ourselves with Jesus and with his disciples. If one were charting the narrative of Jesus' life, Luke chapter 9 would mark the turning point, and this particular passage, one of the highpoints of the entire gospel narrative. Here, Jesus has just confronted his disciples, for the first time, with his identity and his true calling. In the wake of this announcement, Peter makes his profession of faith and Jesus then issues his call to discipleship, *If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me* (9:23). Eight days later, we are told, the Master takes Peter, James, and John and goes up onto a mountain to pray. He leaves behind the comfort of people to go and immerse himself in silence. He turns his back on the familiar to trudge up a mountain and to submerge himself in what Simon and Garfunkel call, "the sounds of silence." In a few short verses, according to Luke's account, he will *turn his face to go up to Jerusalem*, beginning what we know as his "Passion." But today he is headed up the mountain.

Now mountains in the scriptures, and in ancient literature in general, usually refer to a place of meeting with God. Northrop Frye, from whom I learned so much about biblical imagery, points to mountains as the proto-typical place of revelation—where the earth scrapes the heavens. And today's scripture lessons all confirm this. There is a kind of weaving back and forth in which the two testaments engage in interpreting one another. Something revelatory is happening. But Peter and his companions almost miss the show. Their eyes grow heavy and they begin to sink into slumber. They experience what many of us do, early in the morning as the alarm goes off, as we remain dwellers in that land somewhere between dream and reality.

While Peter and his friends exist somewhere between earth and zombie-land, Jesus is portrayed as being in conversation with Moses and Elijah. And the narrative is littered with apocalyptic imagery meant both to elucidate Jesus' identity, as well as to guard it behind a veil of mystery. I can imagine these three amigos snapping out of their state of semi-slumber, opening their eyes, and being confronted with what the gospel writer calls "the glory of God." Now when God's glory is spoken of in Exodus, Moses is forced to wear a veil to protect the people. They cannot stand to be confronted with God's glory. It is like the experience of having a high-powered light bulb go off in your face: you can't see anything except that weird blue dot in front of you. So Moses had to wear a veil. But what is really interesting in today's account is that Luke is the only gospel writer who uses this phrase, "the glory of God," in conjunction with the story of the

Transfiguration. And he uses it more than once. Coming as it does, on the heels of his first announcement of the passion, it serves to connect his insistence on suffering with the resurrection. For it is in Jesus' rising that he is explicitly referred to as manifesting his "glory." Unlike Mark, who makes no connection between today's metamorphosis and Christ's resurrected glory, Luke seeks to clearly build a bridge between the two, writing in hindsight that this episode can best be understood only in light of Christ's death and resurrection (Fitzmyer, Luke, 794).

Paul seems to build further on this, suggesting that in Jesus, God's glory shone in all of its fullness, in all of its brightness. In Jesus, God condescended to our humanity so that we could see him without his having to turn his backside to us, as he did with Moses. *The Son is the radiance of God's glory*, the writer to the Hebrews says, *and the exact representation of his being* (1:3). That glory, Paul goes on to say, is what makes it possible for us to change: *And we, who with unveiled faces all reflect the Lord's glory, are being transformed into his likeness with ever increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit* (2 Corinthians 3:18).

Moses and Elijah affirmed for the disciples, and confirm for us, that Jesus was not only a great prophet but stood at the apex of the prophetic tradition. In him, God's glory was pleased to dwell in all of its fullness and richness. If we are not convinced by the dazzling brightness and the presence of Israel's two greatest prophetic figures, the descent of the cloud and the voice from heaven (both clear apocalyptic images) should do the trick. This one who has just spoken of the cost of discipleship in such stark and realistic terms is proclaimed the Son of God, and we are commanded to listen to what he has to say. Like that moment in the river Jordan, this is a place of theophany—of revelation and divine mystery. And the story ends the way it began: in utter and complete silence, as the party descends down from the mountain where they will, once again, take up the hard work of ministry that will eventually lead them all to Jerusalem.

But, before we come down off the mountain and begin the journey towards Lent, I want us to think further about these sounds of silence that frame this particular passage. Barbara Brown Taylor, writing in her book, When God is Silent, posits that silence is actually an invitation to hear, and that it serves as God's final defense against our idolatry. Her argument suggests that in our time, when we are pummeled by the proliferation of words, silence offers us a place in which to hear and experience God. She concludes that, "in a world of too many words, silence affects people who are no longer affected by sound. Plenty of us who are defended against sound have no defense against silence." In fact, as I point out to my students, much of contemporary Christian worship has lost its capacity for silence, considering it through the lens of our culture nothing more than "dead air."

Now I am not by nature a silent person, and I doubt if most of us are. We talk to fill the void and to voice our own self-importance. Those few times when silence predominates are usually times of deep pathos or thoughtfulness. For instance, we are silent when we are amazed and stand in awe; we do not have words to describe what we are seeing or feeling. It may be a great experience of nature, such as standing at the railing at the Grand Canyon, or it may be while gazing at a wonderful human creation, such as Salisbury Cathedral or the Empire State Building. And we are sometimes silent when we are fearful and unsure of ourselves. We don't want to say anything that will jeopardize our position. Or we can be silent when we are in pain and agony,

when we stand at the freshly-dug grave of a lost loved one and the tears flow freely. There are simply not words to describe what we are feeling, so we are, as they say, reduced to silence.

I think that the disciples were experiencing something of each of these emotions—awe, fear, and pain at what perhaps lay ahead of them. “Silence is frightening,” Dallas Willard says, “because it strips us as nothing else does, throwing us upon the stark realities of our life. It reminds us of death, which will cut us off from this world and leave only us and God. And in that quiet, what if there turns out to be very little to ‘just us and God’?” But, in that silence there is a kind of sustenance, as well. A man or woman who has learned to spend time in silence, and to be nourished by it, will no longer be pulled apart by all the divergent stimuli of the surrounding world, but will be able to perceive and understand the world from a quiet inner center.

This is hard work for most of us. We live in a Google-like world that wants instant answers and immediate results. Complete silence shocks us because it leaves the impression that nothing is happening, and so is considered to be nonproductive and irrelevant—the worst two charges that can be leveled against any current practice. A lonely person has no inner time or inner rest to wait and to listen. He wants answers and he wants them here and now. But no one was perhaps lonelier than Jesus during his ministry as he sought to teach and heal, and yet consistently throughout Luke’s gospel we find him withdrawing into the silence. So we must ask ourselves the painful question: what does it say about the emptiness of our lives if we must always be plugged in to the I-phone, the computer, or to our music? How is it that we can manage to live whole lives in the midst of the cacophony of noise that makes up the post-modern world, when Jesus couldn’t do it in ancient Palestine? The truth is that we can’t. We have become torn and fragmented people dependent upon incessant noise to block out the pain of our loneliness in a constantly-connected but forever fragmented environment that Sherry Turkle labels being “alone together.”

Today’s gospel lesson, however, posits for us not only the reality of silence, but the need for it. In our opening prayer for this final Sunday of Epiphany, we hear something of this purpose: “O God, who before the passion of your only-begotten Son revealed his glory upon the holy mountain: Grant to us that we, beholding by faith the light of his countenance, may be strengthened to bear our cross, and be changed into his likeness from glory to glory.” That is, suggests the prayer, we need the silence of the mountain and the vision Christ bestows there in order to head into a life centered in the death of Jesus. As the late Fred Craddock suggests in his commentary on this passage: “This is a mountaintop experience but not the kind about which persons write glowingly of sunrises, soft breezes, warm friends, music, and quiet time. On this mountain the subject is death, and the frightening presence of God reduces those present to silence,” (Luke, 135).

In their inimitable song, Simon and Garfunkel speak of “neon gods we make.” These bright lights provide us with false comfort just as the incessant sounds of music prevent us from truly listening. And perhaps no day in the American cultural calendar is more filled with the spectacle of neon gods than this holy day—Superbowl Sunday. Yet, today, Christ invites us to experience him in silence. He asks us to come apart for just a few moments. He offers us his very self in this liminal interlude that stands between his Epiphany and his Passion. And during these moments of silence, he promises us a sustaining vision that will carry us along the road to

Jerusalem on which we are about to embark. It is a hard road, and it will demand from us everything we have. But the God of the universe, revealed in Jesus Christ, promises to go with us. And, for now, like the characters in today's story, that must be enough.