

Second Sunday Of Lent – Naomi Brown

Genesis 15:1-12, 17-18; Psalm 27; Philippians 3:17-4:1; Luke 9:28-43a

The first time I went on WalkAbout in the Smoky Mountains, I was beside myself with joy. Spending 10 days adventuring in the mountains experiencing deep community with a small group of people was the fulfilment of a deep desire I didn't even know I had. Despite the fact that it rained for literally days straight, despite just about everyone else in my group being miserable the whole time, despite having what we thought would be a four-mile day turn into an eight-mile day, I felt more happy and more like myself than I ever had before, and not just because backpacking provides ample opportunities for Lord of the Rings references. With each day in the mountains, I felt like the veil between heaven and earth was getting thinner and thinner and glory was streaming down around us. Everything in sight seemed to be simply dripping with the beauty and mystery of the ordinary. It was with a euphoric sense of accomplishment that I reached the top of our final climb and emerged into the parking lot at Clingman's Dome, but when I got onto the vehicle that would take us down the mountain and back to the other groups, I was filled with reluctance. By the time we reached the meet up point, I was nearly in tears. I could feel the glory slipping away from me and I knew that even if I went on WalkAbout the next year and the year after and again and again, that this experience was gone forever and I could never go back. This past August I went on my seventh WalkAbout, and each time I have had the same feeling. Each experience is different, and some feel more magical and others more ordinary. But each time, no matter how sore my body, how soaked my sleeping bag, or how much that one person in my group gets under my skin, I find myself wishing that it could never end, that we could go on and on and never leave.

It is because of this impulse, which I feel so strongly on WalkAbout but which has haunted me my entire life, that I feel so drawn to Peter on the Mount of Transfiguration. There is perhaps no other verse in the Bible that I resonate with as much as, *It is good for us to be here*; "let's put up some tents." Anytime I have seen glory around me, anytime I have witnessed the ordinary transfigured into the extraordinary, anytime I have experienced something profound with people I love, my impulse is to call it good and set up camp. But like Peter, I do not know what I am saying. I want to cling to any shred of glory that I see, to claim any goodness as all I could ever want or need. I can fool myself that this is a posture of contentment, but the truth is this is a reaction born out of scarcity, out of fear that if I let this one moment go, there will be no others. If I were permitted to build my dwelling in the cloud of glory, I wouldn't need to have those difficult virtues of faith or hope. You don't need to have faith in God when you are seeing the glory of God revealed around you. It is in coming down the mountain that faith is needed, that the memories of what one has seen and heard are converted into belief in what is no longer clear before one's eyes. I can't speak for Peter, but I think this is the fear motivating my cry to put up tents on the mountaintop. I fear that if I leave from here, my faith will not be strong enough to remember what I have seen once I'm down the mountain.

And to be vulnerable with you, church, lately it has not been. For several months, I have seemed unable to believe. I believe what I believe because I choose to believe it, but the deep comfort and assurance is gone. I have felt acutely the crushing truth of my own mortality since Lent last year, when a combination of Ash Wednesday and Pierre Bezukhov in *War and Peace* brought

home to me that that I, Naomi, with all my memories, longings, hopes, and thoughts, will one day die; at the same time visits from my longtime companion, clinical depression, have dampened my ability to have faith and hope in that which I believe. So I find myself this morning asking the same questions as our lectionary readings: how do we live on the other side of the cloud of glory? Paul assures the church in Philippi that our bodies will be transformed in glory like Christ's, but what does that mean for our present lives in our present bodies? The psalmist is crying out to seek the face of God, but what do we do when the face of God no longer seems clear before us? And how can we have faith when we are walking on a journey we know ends in death?

Abram is growing old and remains childless, the psalmist is pursued by enemies bent on killing him, the church in Philippi is beginning to be disillusioned with how long they have been waiting for Christ's return, and Jesus himself is about to set out on a journey towards his own execution. Mortality is lurking in all of our readings, but so is glory. Abram sees the presence of God pass by as a smoking torch. The psalmist is seeking the beauty of the Lord in the temple. Paul paints a picture of humiliation transformed, and the glory of Christ is revealed on the mountaintop. We, like those in our readings, are caught in the tension between the reality of our all too human lives, each second bringing us closer to our deaths, and the glory we have glimpsed and to which we try to cling. But like most of life's tensions, Christ does not give us an out on one extreme or the other. We cannot, like Paul warns the Philippians, ignore the glorious and set our minds on earthly things. But neither are we permitted to set up camp on the mountaintop.

This tension between mortal frailty and heavenly glory is the very core of the Christian faith, and it is the tension we lean into each year in the Lenten season. Christ embodies both of these realities to their fullest, and both are clearly displayed in today's gospel text. Here we have Christ revealed in glory, and his identity as the Son of God is proclaimed. But at the same time, the subject of Jesus's talk with Moses and Elijah is his own impending death in Jerusalem. Just a few verses before today's reading, Jesus predicts his death for the first time in Luke's gospel. But now here he is shown in all his power and majesty—surely such a man could resist death if he pleased. But Jesus does not stay on the mountain in his transfigured state. He comes down and just after what we read today, Luke tells us that *as the days drew near for him to be taken up, he set his face to go to Jerusalem*. The transfiguration sets the scene for Jesus's journey to the cross. Carrying with him the tension between mortality and glory, he walks boldly towards his death and invites us to do the same.

And it is on this journey towards the cross that we can begin to weave a pattern of faith as we integrate the promise of glory into our mortal lives. Peter and I cry out *it is good for us to be here* because we have narrow imaginations and think this must be the fullness of what God has for us. But Jesus goes down the mountain and heals a sick child. Jesus shows that the goodness of God is not only found up there on the mountain, but that it is breaking through even here, in this ordinary crowd of people. To echo our psalm, *the goodness of the LORD* is to be seen not only with dead prophets on a mountain, it is found even here *in the land of the living!* Even in this faithless and perverse generation, mortality and frailty are not the whole story—there is wonder and majesty and healing to be called forth. On the mountain only Peter, James, and John could witness the glory, and they kept silent about what they saw. Down the mountain, *all were astounded at the greatness of God*. So, “how can we have faith as we journey to our deaths?” We

can have faith because we follow a God who walked down the mountain and on to Jerusalem. We can have faith because we trust in the identity of the one who journeys beside us, and trust that the glory of God is not confined to a tabernacle, a temple, or a mountaintop but is found here, in the land of the living.

This is the faith we see in Abram in today's readings as well. Here we have Abram, who has heard God's promise and faithfully followed God's call. But time has passed, and Abram remains childless. It's only reasonable that even Abram, renowned for his faith, may have begun to doubt whether or not he misunderstood God's promise, or maybe even that God had forgotten Abram altogether. So when God again speaks to Abram, promising him great reward, Abram is bold enough to question God's promise. *What will you give me, for I continue childless?* God does not rebuke Abram for his questioning. Instead, he takes him outside and asks him to count the stars in the sky, if he is able. While this response lacks the kind of detailed information God gives Abraham a few chapters later, when the name, mother, and even birthday of Isaac are revealed, the promise of the night sky serves to remind Abram that God has indeed promised him descendants and, more importantly, that this God who is able to count the stars in the sky has the power to fulfill what is promised.

And apparently, Abram gets the message. The passage continues, *And he believed the LORD and the LORD reckoned it to him as righteousness.* This is one of those famous verses often plucked from its context (as Paul does in Romans 4), but it is decidedly tricky. The word translated as *righteousness* is commonly understood to mean acting justly or being in right relationship. But since there is no action to be seen here, it is Abram's trust that is considered to be righteous. However, while our translation gives us *the LORD reckoned it to him as righteousness*, a footnote tells us the literal Hebrew is "he reckoned it to him as righteousness." Many translators have replaced this pronoun with *the LORD*, but I like the ambiguity of the original. Could it be not only that Abram believed the LORD and the LORD considered Abram's faith to be right and just, but also that Abram believed the LORD, and considered the LORD's trustworthiness to be right and just? I like these double readings because they speak to the relational nature of trust. It is right and just to trust those who are trustworthy. And it is right and just to be worthy of the trust of others. Abram trusts the LORD, but this is not a blind belief. Immediately after this reckoning of righteousness, Abram again questions the LORD and asks for a sign that he can count on for believing in God's promise.

The strange scene that follows would have made sense to Abram as a covenant ritual. In the Ancient Near East, the party making the covenant would walk through the animal halves with the meaning, "Let this happen to me if I break this oath." But in this case, it is God, and not Abram, who moves between the pieces and takes this oath. Indeed, unlike in Genesis 17 where circumcision is required of Abraham and his descendants, in this passage there are no conditions at all for God's covenant. The onus is completely on God, who vows to give this land to Abram's descendants. Thus, the sign the LORD provides Abram is not about the promise itself, but about the nature of the promiser. In today's passage Abram can see that this God, who is able to count the stars in the sky and who comes near to make unconditional promises, is powerful, faithful, and is aware and involved in his own human life. Abram trusts God not just because of what God promises to give to him, but because of who he has come to know this God to be.

Years after our gospel lesson for today, we find reference to the Transfiguration in second Peter chapter one, *Since I know that my death will come soon . . . I will make every effort so that after my departure you may be able at any time to recall these things. For we did not follow cleverly devised myths when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we had been eyewitnesses of his majesty. For he received honor and glory from God the Father when that voice was conveyed to him by the Majestic Glory, saying, "This is my Son, my Beloved, with whom I am well pleased." We ourselves heard this voice come from heaven, while we were with him on the holy mountain.*

Whether or not Peter was indeed the author of 2 Peter is a matter of scholarly debate, but whether this is the historic apostle or another author using Peter as the mouthpiece for his or her writing, the Peter in this text is approaching death. And it is in the transfiguration, not in the resurrection or the ascension of Christ, that Peter finds comfort and assurance for himself and the Church. His certainty as he looks to his death is not in the promises of Jesus, but in the identity of Jesus as the Beloved Son of God. Although he was not permitted to put up camp on the mountain, Peter has woven this experience of glory into the fabric of his life. He can draw comfort in the assurance that the man he saw transfigured on the mountain is the same man who came down into the crowd and healed a sick child. Peter approaches his death with confidence, not because he has seen a man rise from the dead, but because he has walked alongside a man who was revealed in power but chose to journey to the cross.

As we take our own journey to the cross this Lent, I rejoice that we follow a God who became incarnate not just to die a mortal death, but live a mortal life. I rejoice that the transfigured Christ does not heed my pleas to build a dwelling on the mountaintop, but rather calls me to accompany him down the mountain and to the cross. As we wander in this Lenten season, may our hope be not only in a life to come, but here and now in the identity of the God who dwells among us, who has shared in our mortality, and whose goodness is to be found not only in splendor on the mountaintop, but also in the land of the living.