

A Sermon for DaySpring
By Burt L. Burleson
Falling in Place
Exodus 34: 29-35; Luke 9: 28-36; II Cor. 3: 12-18
February 18, 2007

Sometimes in our lives... things line up...
Sometimes in the Bible...
Sometimes in our worship...
In our understanding of what is...

Things line up. Like tumblers in a pad lock falling into place one by one, things line up and something clicks and something is unlocked and the door swings open and... there it is and... it's wonderful.

At least for a moment.

Transfiguration Sunday is like that... The texts we heard want to fall into place and the truth with it...

It begins with Moses, who having been face to face with the Divine, is all aglow. Which is to say, when you get near to God, God is going to rub off on you. And I don't just mean that emotionally or ethically or in some touchy feely way. I mean literally, the being of God is going to radiate within you.

Tell me, if you don't feel a kind of lightness, when you have been to the mountaintop. It's real... it's bodily. There's, as the spiritual tradition describes it, a gravity from above that lifts you... and it's not taking place in the mind. It is not just an idea.

Spirit finds an expression... an incarnation.

It radiates through the creation...

And it did through Moses.

He was beaming as he walked down carrying the two tablets.

And they veiled his face. Every time he would climb up into that cloud and go before the Mystery, he'd get lit up, his handlers would veil his face. In part because of the glare... It was just tough on the eyes, I guess...

A little scary too...

Kind of wiggled people out...

You know how that is...

But truth be told it wasn't just that it was hard on the eyes... it was hard on their faith when the glory faded... which, of course, it always did.

It was inevitable. Moses, as spiritual as he was, couldn't sustain the connection and the radiance would fade and so with it the faith of the folks who saw that. Their faith was dependent on his radiance... it was external to them.

So... the veil was not only to protect them from infinite glory but from finite limitation. They couldn't handle God's radiance or the lack of it. Both were too much to take... Too much God... not enough God.

So there's the Old Testament. Let it fall in place like a tumbler. Mystery... clouded (by definition a mystery is)... Radiance veiled and unveiled and veiled again. But seemingly, so out of reach... inaccessible and unpredictable. Here today and gone tomorrow... It all seems up there... beyond us... external... certainly beyond our reach.

But then there is the gospel story of Emmanuel, God with us. And there is this Gospel Story... Luke's rendering of this moment where we're taken back up on the mountain and the radiance of Divine being is there for us to see again, this time in Jesus... and Moses is there, again... glowing like his old self. And so is Elijah. And they're all talking... glowing face to glowing face.

What follows is very important... so let it fall like another tumbler. Peter and James and John (the leaders of the Church as Luke writes)... These disciples... who were closest to Jesus... were **“very sleepy.”**

Now, I’ve told you and I’ll say it over and over and over... this line isn’t incidental. The evangelist, Luke, isn’t saying, **“You know how first century disciples can be after a walk up the mountain... they always need a power nap.”**

No... give Luke more credit than that.

Luke is smarter

and the early church that gave us this gospel

is more intentional than that...

and furthermore... the Holy Spirit works in much more complex ways than that. The Holy Spirit is “multi-lingual”... one thing is said and many things are heard. Pentecost is always happening.

These disciples were asleep... But they were still up there with Jesus. They were disciples... followers... They believed some things... They were doing some things. They’d already been sent out and had been preaching and even performing the miraculous.

These were disciples...

In fact, they were the inner circle...

And they were asleep as to who Jesus was.

It happens... It happens with all of us. We start in one place, **“I’m a follower... I’m curious.”** **“He’s my teacher, he inspires me.”** **“He’s my best friend, we sang it so in Vacation Bible School.”** **“He’s my savior... died for my sin... the creed says so.”** **“I’m in His Church... I’m in the Body of Christ.”**

All of this is true and we can be followers... believers professing and confessing... and yet, still be really sleepy about a lot of things, including who Jesus is. Or said another way, there’s still more we need to wake up to.

So Peter, Mr. Keys to the Kingdom, is snoring away on the mountain and Luke says (and notice carefully his words), **“but when they became fully awake, they saw his glory...”**

And that doesn’t just mean that they noticed he was lit up like a lightning bolt, as Luke put it. It means that when they became fully awake they perceived more fully the reality of who he was... They glimpsed this mystery... It wasn’t so veiled anymore. Their friend Jesus was standing with heavenly beings. And the divine mystery was right there with them... so close they could touch it.

And know for sure, Luke is saying to the Church (some 30 years after Jesus death...) His followers were waking up to who Jesus was... They didn’t get it all the first time out. The veil came off slowly. He was Jesus, their teacher... He was their leader... he was the Messiah... he was Divine.

The divine-human one... The Church was waking up to this... And kept waking up to this... we still are.

He is the theanthropos...

The God-man...

Not half and half... whole and whole.

One person, two natures. Son of God, son of Man.

The veil parted and his disciples saw... then they heard, that voice... (from the cloud, of course.) **“This is my son... listen to Him.”** Which I think for all those first reading Luke (and really for all of us) should be a great relief. (And it’s a bit of a rabbit, but one that should be chased.)

Because here he is talking to Moses and Elijah... and all the early Christians were trying to figure out where Jesus fit in all of this. There’s the law and the prophets... and now there’s Jesus...

Is this something totally new or what?

Is Jesus just tweaking the Old Testament?

Is this just a remake of a classic?

And God is saying, **“No... start with Jesus. Listen to Jesus. Jesus can help you understand Moses... Jesus will tell you how to appropriate Elijah.”** So, it’s kind of an interpretive word to the Church, then and now.

Because the followers of Moses and Elijah are always with us and that's good. Those who know and uphold the law... they care about that... What the scriptures say about this or that.

And we have those prophetic voices who are always challenging us... poking and prodding us to place our concern for the oppressed and the marginalized front and center.

You know how this is... right and left... calling and challenging. Helpful... often frustrating... because Moses and Elijah are rarely embodied in the same person. So, they show up again and again here and there... in this group or that. This person or that one... often in the same Sunday School class... (don't we know).

And it's helpful, so helpful to hear God saying, **“This is my son, listen to him. Jesus will help you know what to make of Moses and Elijah.”**

That's helpful, huh? But it's more than a theological word about how to interpret scripture. It's not... **“Well... all you have to do is get Jesus figured out, then you're okay... Get the right doctrines down about Jesus and you'll be fine.”**

That's a good thing... getting your doctrines down... But not finally what this mysterious voice from the clouds would be saying. It's more than that...

“Listen to him... Listen.” The root word is the same as the word “obey.” It has to do with being in some kind of submissive position. A relationship of trust... where we are guided.

When Moses and Elijah get conflicted, anywhere... including within ourselves... We need to remember that Jesus is a living Lord who will guide us. And if we don't believe that, if we think it's all up to us to figure it out and control it... We really haven't woken up to who Jesus is. Not at the level where it can matter. Jesus lifts us into understanding.

Peter, James, and John are awake for a moment... And like every human being the first response is to try and capture the moment... control it... cling to it. **Let's build some little houses for all three of you and just hang out.**

I sure don't blame them... House this! Capture it before it fades.

I'd love to be able to bottle every moment with the transcendent I've had... Then I could open it up on Monday morning or in some “dark night” and pour out the mystery on what was ailing me...

It never works though...

I have to keep coming back here... (on the 8th day)

I have to keep longing and seeking

And sometimes, that's all there is... longing and seeking but sometimes... I find, we find ourselves on the mountain again... more awake to the mystery.

And that's a good thought to take us to the reading from Paul's epistle. Maybe it'll be the last tumbler to click into place. Paul's playing with the metaphor of the veil... only the veil's no longer on Moses, and it's not on Jesus, it's on the people as they read Moses.

And they can't read Moses in the right way... They're stuck in a legalism. They can't go beyond the moral level. They don't get it, they can't perceive... the veil has not been taken away.

“Because,” he says, “Only in Christ is it taken away... when anyone turns to the Lord, the veil is taken away.”

We turn... and the veil is taken.

We turn... and it's removed.

In other words, you can't unveil yourself. You turn... and the veil is removed. It's sort of a one, two step that takes place. The human-divine two-step. A dance God wants to do with all of us... We turn to the Lord and the veil is taken away. This veil... and notice Paul's language, *“that covered their hearts.”*

The heart is the center of our inner being. Not the seat of our emotions, understood biblically, but the center of that part of us that can perceive what is spiritual... We can engage what is eternal... we can know that spiritual realm... directly.

So, unveiling the heart isn't about getting our theology straight, as helpful as that is... it's about freeing us to see all things, in their fullness. And we can't, because our hearts are veiled.

We can't see all there is to see... and the perception we do have is limited... straining to see, as we are, through the veils of our brokenness and our experience and our egos. We can't see straight.

Do you know the story about those men in that small town who, on the night when they heard the broadcast of Orson Wells *War of the World*, grabbed their shotguns, went to the edge of town and pumped buck shot into their own water tower, thinking it was a flying saucer?

We don't see very well, especially in the early stages of the spiritual life. The heart is too veiled. And... if... if we get tired enough of putting holes in the water tower... And if we get tired enough of hurting one another... IF THAT HAPPENS... we repent.

We turn... we turn... we turn, again and again and as we do the veil is taken away. That's the promise of God... it's what the Lord will do in your life. You can count on that...

Usually little by little... Oh, sometimes, God lifts it completely but typically we can't keep it off and it falls back again or at least over part of the heart.

But... we see a little better and a little better... And the thing is... the heart is not only an organ of perception...

It's an organ of reception and reflection as well. We receive and reflect spirit... we radiate it... just like Moses.

Got that? It's an important spiritual teaching and I want us all to learn it along the way. The heart, this inner mind where we perceive and know spiritual things, is also a vehicle for receiving and transmitting... so it's for perception, reception and reflection. (Were I a three-point-preacher... that'd make a nice sermon, huh?)

Spiritual teachers throughout time have known this and so they've talked about *polishing the mirror of the heart*. We keep polishing... we keep polishing and along the way we start reflecting something that is beyond us but coming through us.

And now the last tumbler can fall and maybe the door can swing wide... and there it is... it's so wonderful. We're having direct encounters with God and that Glory is rubbing off on us too.

And we're being transfigured, just like Jesus. Christ is unveiled and so are we. We're able to know who we are... **"We're being transformed,"** it said there in our epistle, **"Into the likeness of Christ."** What he is by nature, we're to become by adoption. **"To all of us,"** Paul says, **"Is given the power to become sons and daughters of God."**

So the veil is coming off of us and we're not only seeing, but we're being seen. And what do you know... there is ever increasing glory... in you... in your life. It's all lining up now... in you.

The radiance of God... in you, from you, and through you. Amen.