

A Radiant People

Matthew 17: 1-9

Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and his brother John and led them up a high mountain, by themselves. And he was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became bright as light. Suddenly there appeared to them Moses and Elijah, talking with him. Then Peter said to Jesus, "Lord, it is good for us to be here; if you wish, I will set up three tents here, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah." While he was still speaking, suddenly a bright cloud overshadowed them, and a voice from the cloud said, "This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!" When the disciples heard this, they fell to the ground and were overcome by fear. But Jesus came and touched them, saying, "Get up and do not be afraid." And when they raised their eyes, they saw no one except Jesus himself alone. As they were coming down the mountain, Jesus ordered them, "Tell no one about the vision until after the Son of Man has been raised from the dead."

There is a show on Netflix about a guy who shines. He's having dinner with a colleague at a restaurant, or he's working at his office desk, and suddenly his face starts to radiate a yellowish glow. The show is called *God's Favorite Idiot* and throughout the first few episodes his friends and coworkers are trying to figure out what is going on. Did he get abducted by aliens? Or was he swimming in a radioactive pool? Turns out, the glowing guy was chosen by God to help God with some...you know, God stuff. It's humorous and farfetched. And it is similar to the story we read every year at the end of Epiphany just before Lent begins. Jesus leads some disciples up the hill and suddenly his clothes are dazzling white as his face shines like the sun. It's a bit 'out there' as well. So what do we do with radioactive Jesus?

Maybe we begin by consulting the experts. After all, there are many theologians who have their theories. Some say the story is about Jesus' divinity and the ancestral characters who join him. There's Moses who represents the law. Elijah who represents the prophets. Jesus, of course, fulfills them both. Others say it is about paying attention to the details. Six days, a mountain, a glowing face, three tabernacles, a cloud, a voice. All of it points backwards to Moses climbing Mt. Sinai when his face glowed as he received the commandments. Those who take the moral angle find it important that Jesus receives a reminder of his baptism to strengthen him before he climbs back down into the real world where the hard work begins. All these angles are trying to make sense of what is going on with radioactive Jesus and *what it actually means*.

Of course, perhaps there is another angle to consider. You see, the gospel writer could be reinterpreting events of what God's glory truly is. Whereas before Moses' face glowed because of God's presence externally around him, Jesus' face glows from the inside out. Whereas, the tabernacle was created to house God's glory, now there is no dwelling necessary. You see, it's a commentary which brings new meaning into the old stories. God's glory is not something bestowed onto us from an outside divine source. God's glorious love shines from who Jesus is, from the inside out. And the voice on the top of the mountain affirms this. Jesus radiates like the sun not because he is being transformed into something else. He radiates like the sun because

that is who he is! And you know what? It is at the very core of who we are as well. You are a radiant people!

Except, notice when things go back to “normal” Jesus says something a bit odd to his disciples. He tells them not to breathe a word to anyone until after he has been raised from the dead. I mean, could you imagine him saying something like that today? I imagine the disciples getting out their iPhones, capturing the video of Jesus glowing as he jibber jabbers with Moses and Elijah. And afterwards the video goes viral with all the “wow” emojis and the memes! But no. Instead he says, “Don’t breathe a word of this to anyone.” Why? Wouldn’t it make more sense to show the world who Jesus really is, and who we really are?

Except, he tells them to stay quiet because there is an important part of the story which has yet to be fulfilled: the suffering part. If all we were to capture of God’s glory is a dazzling, shiny-faced Jesus we will more than likely conflate him into a glorified savior, rather than one who also suffers. We will turn him into a superficial spectacle to be praised in power, rather than the vulnerable incarnation of a God who calls us to follow in radical love. In our culture we prefer to bask in the glow of Jesus’s radiant love, which is part of the story. But Jesus says not to ‘say anything to anyone’ because God’s radiant love isn’t only on display on the mountaintop, it’s also on display on the cross. And unless we take in both, we won’t understand what God’s glory is truly about and how to speak of who God is faithfully.

Well, what do we do with it? After all, it’s the story we belong to, isn’t it? One which holds both glory and suffering together. Many of us heard this week what happened to our sister church, Dellabrook. On the night of Valentine’s Day someone broke into the church, smashed windows, sprayed the church with a fire extinguisher, slashed furniture, knocked portraits off the wall. It’s more than the physical harm done to the building. There’s the emotional, psychological, and spiritual hurt to deal with as well. The incident is painful and angering, and not something I would call “glorious” at all. Yet, I wonder if somehow the vulnerability of the event has brought them closer, a deeper sense of resiliency, and dare I say invited them into radiating God’s compassion in a way that shines a light on the fullness of the gospel. It’s the story we belong to—glory and suffering—even though one is clearly easier to embrace than the other.

It is pure wisdom on Jesus’ part to ask the disciples to pause before they speak. To take in both the shiny and the suffering of the gospel so we can tell the whole story faithfully. It is this fullness which makes us a radiant people who understand God’s glory in both beauty and vulnerability as a people who continue to shine God’s love from the inside out.