

THE VISION AND THE VOICE¹
Matthew 17: 1-9
A sermon by Thomas R. McKibbens
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Jesus took with him Peter and James and his brother John and led them up a high mountain by themselves. Of course! Jesus had to mend a strained relationship with Peter after Jesus had called him “Satan” and a “stumbling block.” These were close-knit friends, and a little disagreement would not stop them from going off alone to make sure they were together. Besides, their world was becoming more and more stressful, and they needed to get away for some perspective.

I

What better place to go than to a mountaintop...up where they feel closer to God...up on the border between heaven and earth...up where in their tradition, God and humans were more likely to meet. They trudged up the trail to the heights, where they could look down at all the world about them.

I can't help but wonder what the view was like from the heights of Mount Herman. As the sun set in the west over the Mediterranean Sea in the distance, they could look out as darkness descended and see the twinkling lights of the coastal villages. To the southeast they could look out beyond the

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Sea of Galilee and see the lights of Nazareth. I wonder if Jesus thought about his widowed mother living down there, and how she was doing without him. Maybe he remembered his father's death and wondered what Joseph would think of him now. Would he approve of his son's life so far? Would he advise Jesus to stop wandering and go back home to take care of his mother?

Then he could look farther south, so far south that he might have wondered if the shimmer of light off in the distance was Jerusalem itself. What would await him there? There was the Temple that he loved, the gleaming Temple that he had visited as a child, the place where he first felt the awesome power of God. But there was also a petty Roman bureaucrat named Pilot, a garden called Gethsemane, and a hill called Golgatha. All of them waited for him there. He could get a better perspective on things from the mountaintop.

II

Our perspective on the world is reached, not so much by climbing a steep trail, but by walking over to the TV or the computer terminal and turning it on. That is a source of information about our world. It is not a place where we feel especially closer to God, but it is a place where we can see all the nations of the world. From our living rooms we can view the devastation in Japan, the revolutions in North Africa, and the pain of those closer to home.

We have a source of information that Jesus could never imagine, but one that allows us to see the whole world at the touch of a button.

We can get a bird-eye view of the elemental power of nature that can shake us from our preoccupations like nothing else. The indiscriminate destruction caused by earthquakes and tsunamis messes with our sense of cosmic justice. It shatters our romantic views of nature and dispels the theology of “Everything happens for a reason.” The Japanese are the only people who have suffered a nuclear attack, and now they are suffering again from what will be prolonged radiation contamination. This cruel irony leaves us in stunned silence.

This triple tragedy to one nation reminds us of how little control we have of nature. In spite of our valiant attempts to manage, contain, control and forestall the unforeseeable, we know in personal, intimate ways that cancer (for example) can strike like a personal tsunami, and we know that all our knowledge and acts of prevention are not guaranteed to spare us. One gigantic wave of illness or tragedy can strike at any time, and we are all vulnerable.

So as we look with broken hearts at what our brothers and sisters in Japan are experiencing, let us steadfastly deny the temptation to give easy answers. Such suffering and disasters are great mysteries, and the mystery

demands to be honored. We must not say, "God wills this," and we can respectfully and strongly object to those who do. We can refuse to be among those who give easy, pious answers to such suffering.

What we can do is pray with our words and with our wallets, with our time and with our talent. We can reach out across the Pacific and around the block to those who are touched by this tragedy. We can listen, sympathize, lend a hand, and act in any way we can to relieve the suffering of those around us.

And perhaps we should add one more thing: we can lament. Lament has a great tradition in the Bible, especially in the psalms. Laments ask those passionate, difficult, and ancient questions that ring down through the ages: "Why?" "How long?" And laments are free to express our dismay, our anger, our doubts, and our fears. This would be a good time to re-read some of the psalms of lament.

III

Up on the mountaintop where Jesus took his three friends, something profound happened. We can no more understand what we term the "transfiguration" than we can fully understand earthquakes and tsunamis. But we can say this: clearly there was a spiritual experience that happened on that mountain that stands behind this extraordinary story. When they came

down off that mountaintop, the disciples were convinced that Jesus was someone special. The voice they heard said, *This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!*

This story always serves as a reminder that we cannot expect truth always to be packaged in rationality. It is not surprising that every generation since Jesus has treasured this story. It begins with Jesus struggling over suffering and death, just as we do...just as the world does as it observes the suffering of Japan.

Jesus stood on that mountaintop contemplating his own impending suffering and death. When he looked down at the lights of Nazareth, surely he wondered what his mother would do when he died. Like him, we wonder too. And we faithfully contribute to our retirement accounts and pay our insurance premiums. We prepare our wills and assign our health proxies. Some of us have the foresight to direct some of our estate to institutions that have meant much to us in our lifetime, like the church or a school, helping to extend the ministry long after we are gone.

But there's more: this story is also a reminder that in the midst of every tragedy, every heartbreak, every tsunami of grief, there is God's presence. Here it is symbolized by the *bright cloud* that *overshadowed them*. This bright cloud is rich and full of allusions to familiar stories of the past. The rabbis

called it *shekinah*, the presence of God. Even when we cannot give rational reasons for suffering, the bright cloud of God's presence overshadows us. This is the stroke of realism in this story: there are times when we experience the overwhelming presence of the divine, and we cannot explain it or describe it, or even talk about it. It just is. And it remains in our hearts as a reminder of the presence of God with us.

IV

At the end of this story of the transfiguration, the disciples are paralyzed with fear, and Jesus comes to them and touches them, saying, *Get up, and do not be afraid*. Do we dare to allow that to be Christ's word for us today? *Get up and do not be afraid*. Do not allow the fickle devastations of nature or life to thrust us into despair.

The touch of Christ gives us courage and hope to get up and do something positive.