

“Things Seen and Unseen” - A Communion Meditation for February 7, 2016
Transfiguration Sunday – Lectionary Text: Luke 9: 28-36
Offered by Rev. W. Dale Osborne

Luke 9: 28-36

Now about eight days after these sayings Jesus took with him Peter and John and James, and went up on the mountain to pray. And while he was praying, the appearance of his face changed, and his clothes became dazzling white. Suddenly they saw two men, Moses and Elijah, talking to him. They appeared in glory and were speaking of his departure, which he was about to accomplish at Jerusalem. Now Peter and his companions were weighed down with sleep; but since they had stayed awake, they saw his glory and the two men who stood with him. Just as they were leaving him, Peter said to Jesus, “Master, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah” —not knowing what he said. While he was saying this, a cloud came and overshadowed them; and they were terrified as they entered the cloud. Then from the cloud came a voice that said, “This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!” When the voice had spoken, Jesus was found alone. And they kept silent and in those days told no one any of the things they had seen.

Peter and James and John saw the glory of the Lord in a new and vibrant way in our account from Luke’s gospel today. These three students of Jesus had been invited up on a mountain to pray with their Rabbi, their teacher. For these three fishermen, the light of God shone brightly. In prayer and supplication, Jesus was transformed before their sleepy eyes. The scripture tells us that after their revealing encounter with Jesus, Moses and Elijah, they kept silent about the things they had seen. Maybe they kept silent because it was hard to take in all that they had seen. Maybe they kept silent because they did not understand what they had seen and heard. Maybe they kept silent because even though they had seen some dazzling and transformative events that day, we also read that some events were unseen. Did we not just read that a cloud had passed over them in the midst of this mountaintop experience? Surely a cloud, even a cloud that is covering a dazzling light, can blur vision, block vision and cause aspects of life and religious faith to be unseen and mysterious.

Things seen and unseen, this is often a way to describe one’s faith experience. Isn’t it the case that sometimes in life we see something and describe the occurrence as unbelievable, like a “Hail Mary” pass at the end of a football game or a dancer who creates an image through her artistically intricate movements that make you shake your head and say, “I can’t believe she did that.” We see it, but we have a hard time believing it. Conversely, there are times in our life when something is left unseen but we believe it with all of our heart, mind, soul and strength. Consider the wind for example. Consider the love a parent feels for their child who is a thousand miles away. Consider the Divine One we call God. Not seeing exactly, but a whole lot of believing. Things seen and unseen occurred on that mountaintop two thousand years ago. To this very day we are caught up as humans in our quest for things seen and unseen. Our quest for the dazzling light of God’s face. Our quest to find our own mountaintop moment when we can hear clearly whatever message the Divine One is sending our way. Peter and James and John heard, “This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him.”, as they shook with fear on the mountaintop. For our communion meditation today I want to share three brief stories of things seen and unseen in our era. Three stories that have metaphorical and physical mountains in them.

Shania is a determined and struggling young mother of one toddler son. She calls herself a country girl from Chatham County but now she lives in public housing in Chapel Hill. Decent paying jobs have been hard to come by for Shania. The fear of being evicted has brought her to Binkley and my door on a Friday morning. Many of you know that Binkley has a community ministry on Fridays where we listen to, pray with and financially support community members who are struggling to pay for medicine, rent or utilities. I actually met Shania and her very young son about 13 months earlier when she had a similar economic hardship. On this visit we catch up, pray and begin to see each other more clearly. Shania proudly tells me that she got married about one year ago. She smiles as she speaks about her husband and then she relays the story of their marriage and immediate separation. “We got married by the magistrate in Hillsborough” she says. “The next day my husband was transferred to federal prison in South Carolina, about 4.5 hours from here. Next Friday I will drive to the

prison and pick him up. He is being released. I have been able to see him once since we got married. It has been hard to love someone and not be able to see him.” I was struck by Shania’s situation. Her economic circumstances meant that driving back and forth to the South Carolina prison was a rare to impossible option. We prayed for her safe journey because long trips and driving in general makes her anxious. For Shania and her husband, prison and distance caused a metaphorical mountain to rise up between them. Her eyes looked hopeful and curious as she talked about a husband seen and unseen.

Story two - Many of you know that the youth of our church enjoy time together in all kinds of circumstances. We can be grateful for the beautiful, compassionate and talented young people who call Binkley their home. One of them will sing a little later in the service. One of the circumstances that our youth love most dearly is a summer week called Baptist Youth Camp or BYC. For over 15 years the BYC experience that brings together about a dozen churches has occurred high on a North Carolina mountaintop with several breathtaking overlooks. Most of the youth and adults who attend camp will tell you that they experience God and humanity in a precious and dazzling way on that mountaintop adventure. I can heartily agree with them. Last Sunday night, the youth group met to talk about the BYC experience and to share the good news of BYC with sixth graders and their parents who have not yet been to camp. We set up a speed dating experience where you spent about one minute traveling around an inner and outer circle of chairs. The inner circle, composed of BYC veterans actually remained seated while the outer circle, composed of inquiring minds, rotated around the circle. One questioner was asked as you met with a new veteran, “What do you like about the BYC experience?” I loved all the answers I heard as I pretended to be a newbie regarding BYC. Everything from developing stronger relationships to yoga exercises were lifted up. But the answer from one young high school student stuck with me the most. She said, “The part of BYC I like the best is being encouraged and challenged to consider my relationship to God in worship. The seniors who speak prophetically are honest and genuine when they talk about their hopes, fears and doubts as they relate to God. I get the feeling when I’m there that my thoughts and feelings about God are valued and not judged. This gives me hope and makes me smile.” For this youth on a mountaintop, God’s light is transforming and shaping her in matters seen and unseen. In matters heard and unspoken, she is listening for God’s voice as well.

Story three – This final story is older and it’s one that I am only connected to through lessons of history. Many of you will know it better than me. This story takes place in Memphis, Tennessee at a Masonic Temple where Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr is addressing a large crowd of his fellow travelers in the struggles for civil rights. As an aside, the federal courts recently offered a ruling that I think would have been pleasing to Dr. King. You may have heard that the courts found and ruled that recreating the congressional voting districts in NC could not be done if the motivating factor was an attempt at gerrymandering the districts along racial lines. Dr. King’s speech in Memphis that night would be the last public speech he ever delivered. Soon thereafter, he would be assassinated at that fateful Memphis hotel in 1968. The speech was bold and clear and prophetic. During the speech, Dr. King spoke of his near death experience in New York in 1961. He was stabbed during a book signing and the weapon nearly clipped his aorta which would have caused him to probably drown in his own blood. The doctors and newspapers reported that if he had sneezed the wound would have moved just a little and he could have died. A 9th grade girl sent Dr. King a letter while he was in the hospital.

In the speech Dr. King says,

Well, about four days later, they allowed me, after the operation, after my chest had been opened and the blade had been taken out, to move around in the wheelchair of the hospital. They allowed me to read some of the mail that came in, and from all over the states and the world kind letters came in. I read a few, but one of them I will never forget. I had received one from the president and the vice president; I've forgotten what those telegrams said.

But there was another letter that came from a little girl, a young girl who was a student at the White Plains High School. And I looked at that letter and I'll never forget it. It said simply, "Dear Dr. King: I am a ninth-grade student at the White Plains High School." She said, "While it should not matter, I would like to mention that I'm a white girl. I read in the paper of your misfortune and of your suffering. And I read that if you had sneezed, you would have died. And I'm simply writing you to say that I'm so happy that you didn't sneeze."

Dr. King told his audience that he was grateful he had not sneezed as well. If he had died in 1961 he would have missed out on many accomplishments brought about by peaceful protests from 1961 to 1968. I want to close my meditation by remembering the final paragraph of Dr. King's speech. In these few sentences, he casts a shining light on things seen and things unseen. In these sentences he reminds me of the disciples observing the transfiguration of Jesus.

Well, I don't know what will happen now; we've got some difficult days ahead. But it really doesn't matter to me now, because I've been to the mountaintop. And I don't mind. Like anybody, I would like to live a long life—longevity has its place. But I'm not concerned about that now. I just want to do God's will. And He's allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I've looked over, and I've seen the Promised Land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people, will get to the Promised Land. And so I'm happy tonight; I'm not worried about anything; I'm not fearing any man. Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord.