

What Is God Trying to Tell You?

Recently, I was blessed to witness an amazing event. Driving past an estuary of the Bay, I spotted a bald eagle trying to capture a seagull that was floating on the water. The two birds fought for several tense seconds, then the seagull dove under water, taking the eagle with it. The eagle didn't appreciate being dunked. It let go of the seagull, who quickly escaped while the eagle flapped away to perch on a nearby post where its feathers could dry. Their life and death battle couldn't have taken more than half a minute; if I had driven by twenty seconds sooner or later, I would have missed the whole thing. The scene felt surprisingly powerful, even prophetic. It was as though God was speaking directly to me in that moment, sending me a vital message through those fighting birds. And for the life of me, I haven't the foggiest notion of what God was trying to say.

That incident came to mind as I read this morning's Gospel passage. Jesus has taken Peter, James and John, the three disciples with whom he's closest, up a mountain. He's suddenly transformed, his everyday appearance ablaze with the glory of God. Israel's two great prophets, Moses and Elijah, materialize and start talking with him. If that isn't mindboggling enough, a brilliant cloud gathers overhead and the Father himself announces, "This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!" The disciples fall to the ground in terror, but Jesus touches them and tells them not to be afraid. When they look up, the divine pyrotechnics are over, and the prophetic ghosts are gone. The disciples see only Jesus, looking just like he always does. He helps them up and they walk back down the mountain. Simple as that.

Scripture doesn't give us detailed instructions on how to respond when Heaven bursts into our everyday reality, but it does tell us that the disciples' reaction is pretty standard stuff. Abraham, Joshua, Ezekiel, and Daniel were all giants of faith, and they all collapsed when they

first encountered God's glory. We can forgive the disciples for reacting the same way. It's not that they lack courage. They're able to withstand Jesus's transfiguration and the abrupt appearance of Moses and Elijah. Peter, always the boldest, even musters enough words to suggest that they take up residence on the mountaintop. But the voice of the Father, speaking directly to them, is enough to knock them flat.

The disciples weren't present at Jesus's baptism in Matthew's Gospel, so they didn't hear the Father's affirmation of Jesus at the River Jordan. They hear the Father's voice for the first time in this moment on the mountain. The Father is very clear about who Jesus is and what he expects them to do. "Listen!" our God commands. If I were one of those disciples I'd be panicked, wondering what I'd done to make the Father think I hadn't been respectful enough toward his boy. "Fear of the Lord" would suddenly take on a whole new meaning.

The Father doesn't often speak so directly in our modern, secular age. Perhaps watching his most sincere followers keel over when he addressed them has persuaded Adonai that he's better off communicating with us in subtler ways. Tradition tells us that looking directly into the glory of God can be fatal. Moses managed it, but his face shone so brightly after conversing with the Lord that he had to wear a veil when addressing his people. I've never seen anyone gleaming behind a veil, and I bet you haven't, either. These days, when someone claims to have gotten a message directly from God, we usually conclude that they're mentally ill or making it up.

But something must have happened on that mountain, because Jesus's transfiguration appears in all three of the Gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke. It's also referenced in the passage from Peter's second letter that we read this morning. I'm not about to suggest that Peter, the rock on which the Christian church was built, was a liar or a madman. Peter says he saw and heard what Matthew describes, and I believe him.

So, what is Jesus doing when he takes his best friends hiking up the mountain? Perhaps he understands that they haven't quite recognized him yet. Perhaps he wants to let them catch a glimpse of who he really is, giving them a chance to adjust to the mind-blowing idea that their beloved teacher also happens to be the Son of the Most High God. Perhaps he loves them so much that he doesn't want them to despair during the three days of his Passion, so he gives them a hint that he's the one being on Earth who might just be able to come back alive from an unspeakably horrible death. Perhaps he knows they'll need all the wisdom and confidence he can instill in them to fulfill their own mission of spreading the good news of the Gospel across the world. And perhaps the Father, like any devoted parent, decides he'd better give the boys a stern talking-to so they'll appreciate just how wonderful his Son really is.

I love the image of Jesus transfigured, blazing with divine fire as he converses with two of Heaven's most legendary prophets. I love to imagine the Father lecturing the disciples from a vast, fiery cloud, wanting to make sure they'll pay proper attention to his beloved Son. But my favorite moment in this passage comes when Jesus returns to his everyday guise and helps the disciples to their feet. The celestial fireworks were spectacular for sure. But the depth of Jesus's love for humanity is, I believe, most evident in the gentle, reassuring way he returns to his ordinary appearance and helps his friends find their footing and reclaim their dignity.

This passage leaves us with the question of why Jesus orders the disciples not to tell anyone about the vision "until after the Son of Man has been raised from the dead." Bible scholars have long debated why Jesus insisted on the so-called "messianic secret" around his divine nature, a motif that's especially prominent in the Gospel of Mark. He undoubtedly had his reasons, and I'm sure I don't completely understand them. But it occurred to me while preparing this sermon that the disciples couldn't possibly grasp the implications of what they'd just seen at

this point. They wouldn't fully get it until after Jesus had been crucified and resurrected. Perhaps, like Jesus's mother, James, John and Peter needed to ponder in their hearts the astonishing things they had just seen and heard, as well as the events that were yet to come, before they could really share their experience. Perhaps we human creatures simply can't understand God's messages until we've had time to sit with them for a while.

And that leads us back to my experience with the eagle and the seagull. I don't know what, if anything, God was trying to tell me that day. Perhaps I never will. But I do know that, if I rush to interpret what I saw, I'll almost certainly get it wrong. It takes time and patience to absorb divine guidance, deep reflection to fully grasp what God has to say. God still speaks to us, and he still urges us to listen. He just makes us work a little harder at it these days than he did on the mountain all those centuries ago.

On Wednesday, we'll enter the season of Lent, a time for prayer, fasting, and repentance. It's customary to give something up for Lent, a bad habit or trifling pleasure that we can easily manage without for forty days. But Lent is also the perfect time for reflection, for putting aside the pressures of our frenzied and thinking seriously about whether we're living our lives in a way that's truly pleasing to God. Perhaps God will send you a vision, a serendipity that catches your attention and sends you in the right direction. Or perhaps you'll hear God's voice encouraging you to make changes in your life or to continue on a particular path. Perhaps you'll hear only silence from God and will need to ponder what that silence means. But I can promise you this. If you invite the Lord to speak to you, whatever you see or hear will come from the God who loves us enough to walk as one of us, who put aside the splendors of Heaven to live as we do, who touches us when we're terrified, picks us up when we fall and helps us find our feet again so we can continue to follow him. Jesus is the Father's beloved Son. Listen to him. *Amen.*