

“THE TERRIFYING POSSIBILITY OF BEING ABLE”

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Last Epiphany (Year C)
Text: Exodus 34: 29-35, Luke 9:28-36
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“Listen to him!”

President Franklin D. Roosevelt, who often endured long receiving lines at the White House, frequently complained, we are told, that no one really paid any attention to what he said.

One day, during a reception, he decided to try an experiment. To each person who came down the line and shook his hand, he murmured, “I murdered my grandmother last night.” The guests, heedless of the words, responded with phrases like, “Marvelous! Keep up the good work. We are proud of you. God bless you sir.”

It was not until the end of the line, while greeting the ambassador from Bolivia, that his words were actually heard. Not quite knowing what to say, the ambassador leaned over and whispered in the President’s ear, “I’m sure she had it coming!”

“Listen to him!”

This strange mountaintop story we hear from the Gospel of Luke burns the memory of Peter, James and John with an indelible image: Jesus as God’s own light. Light from Light. God from God. Begotten not made.

In the words of one scholar, God’s very voice, in this story, marks the legitimacy of the ministry of Jesus.

It is not the first time God’s voice shakes the foundations of an event with public witness around Jesus. At Jesus’ Baptism, God affirms Jesus as his own “beloved.”

So here. As Jesus will mark the definitive road to Jerusalem and to Golgotha on this mountaintop, he does so with the assurance that he is beloved of God. And through all Jesus will undergo, that promise will endure.

Now, God could have followed this declaration of “beloved” with any number of commands.

Yet, of all the things God could have said, he commands the three friends of Jesus to listen.

Listen to Jesus.

What’s all this about?

Any Jew hearing the story of the transfiguration would immediately recognize the similarity of Jesus with Moses. In particular, on the sixth day, Jesus taking three with him up a mountain—just as we read of Moses doing in the Exodus text. Like Moses, whose face shines after speaking with God, so Jesus is also transfigured. A cloud appears to Moses and Jesus and both hear God’s voice.

One can assume Peter, James and John had gotten that message. There on the mountain top when Moses and Elijah appear talking with Jesus, Peter volunteers to build three dwellings, booths, little huts where they can stay. Peter and the disciples are eager to remain in that place—geographically but also theologically—on the mountain top with a Jesus who fits comfortably in the old tradition beside Moses and Elijah.

All seems very reasonable until, while Peter is speaking about making those three dwellings, creating a Jewish trinity, a voice comes from heaven: “This is my son, the Beloved; with him, I am well pleased; listen to him.”

Luke tells us that when they hear this, they fall to the ground, and are overcome with fear.

But more than the voice of God scares them. “Listen to him! Not to Moses and Elijah. Him. What suddenly

becomes apparent to the disciples is that God is separating, differentiating Jesus from Moses and Elijah.

What is the real fear? Perhaps it is about knowing for the first time, that everything they have served and believed, the Mosaic law, and the Elijah prophet tradition—is not the same as Jesus.

“Listen to him!” means hearing a Jesus who is pushing them beyond their religion or leading them more deeply into it. He is pushing them beyond religion as they have known it and God as they have known him. Jesus is going to take them to the heart of Torah love and justice that they had forgotten.

That’s a fearful moment. With it comes what Kierkegaard once called “the terrifying possibility of being able.” Like the disciples, and Jesus, we experience the fear of knowing that we are capable of more and the terror of knowing that it is within our reach.

It is the moment when someone or something like Jesus has the audacity to tell us that what we hold dearest, most sacred, and what is at the heart of our hard won truth is only second best. And there is the opportunity for more....

In 1786, the membership of St. George’s Methodist Episcopal Church in Philadelphia included both blacks and whites. However, the white members met that year and decided that thereafter black members should sit only in the balcony.

Two black worshipers, Absalom Jones and Richard Allen, whose enthusiasm for the Methodist Church had brought many blacks into the congregation, learned of the decision only when, on the following Sunday, ushers tapped them on the shoulder during the opening prayers, and demanded that they move to the balcony without waiting for the end of

the prayer. They walked out, followed by the other black members.

“The terrifying possibility of being able.”

Absalom Jones conferred with William White, Episcopal Bishop of Philadelphia and the future architect and guiding light of the Protestant Episcopal Church in the United States and its Constitution and Canons.

At first White hesitated. Nothing like what Jones asked had ever been done before. The first black parish. Led by a black priest. Unheard of.

The audacity!

“The terrifying possibility of being able.”

White gave consent. St. Thomas Episcopal Church in Philadelphia became the first independent black congregation recognized within the Anglican Communion and within American Christianity.

Jones was ordained as the first black priest of the Episcopal Church. We celebrated his feast day yesterday. There will be a special service to mark his life and legacy at Trinity Cathedral in Trenton this afternoon and all are invited.

Absalom Jones and William White could have both chosen to stay on the mountaintop, clutching what was the only sacred they knew, rather than listen to the voice of one taking them deeper into the tradition they had forgotten—the heart of their faith Jesus would raise again and again with his great voice—the weightier demands of the law, justice, love and compassion.

The Transfiguration story is a story about everyone of us in this room and how we hold on for dear life to those things that we believe will save us and in the end rob of us life. It is indeed a fearful moment to lose the you who you have worked a lifetime becoming. It is that terrifying moment of free fall when a new you cries out to you and

waits...waits to bless you and set you free from being what you are not.

Valentine's Day. I am reminded of a friend whose marriage was in trouble. He went to a marriage counselor. The therapist told him that his problem was that he worked too hard to be a good husband. That is—he had spent years trying to be what he was taught and tutored to be a good husband—meeting expectations, keeping promises, doing all the things that good husbands are supposed to do.

The therapists told him: you have worked so hard on being a good husband, what you lack is having an intimate relationship with the woman to whom you happen to be married.

My friends' challenge—to move beyond this ideal of what a "good husband" is—beyond the Moses and Elijah of marriage bliss—and be present to his wife for a change. Hear her! Move beyond believing that a dozen red roses or dinner out, pearls, mink ore even a romantic vacation can fill the deep yearning people like us have to be known and loved!

Soon after my confirmation at St. Elizabeth's Episcopal Church in Roanoke, I went to my acolyte director with a problem. I told him I thought I needed to resign and could not serve anymore.

"Why?" He asked. "I'm not sure I believe any of this stuff anymore. I don't know what it means. I don't know what the language says. A kid in my biology class ran out of class last week because the teacher was doing a session on evolution and he said she was godless and we were damned for listening to her. I'm reading Thomas Jefferson saying that every religious doctrine should be subject to reason; my biology teacher and Mr. Jefferson make much more sense than anything we are saying in church."

"I have this little handbook for acolytes that says serving at the Altar of God is a privilege and honor; it also says we should say a prayer before coming into church in thanksgiving and I always tried to do until late; I just can't anymore."

So, what was Mr. Perkins's response to this faith-based "J. D. Salinger moment" in a young teen? "Let's play some golf this afternoon."

I'll never forget that day on hole number three at Blue Hills' Golf Club in the beautiful mountains of southwest Virginia. I was attempting to hit my second shot across the water on to the green. Mr. Perkins, knowing my game—warned me from doing so with the quip: "You better start believing again for only the Holy Spirit can carry that ball for you."

As we were walking to the green, he turned, glanced at me with the most loving smile, and just said: You can acolyte anytime—and by the way—I don't think your problem is that you don't believe. Your problem is you're trying to figure out what YOU believe; and you are getting what it TAKES to believe for the first time. You might want to get a good book and discover what the Creeds really mean—to you.

The next week, I went to my Priest, Ben Sanders, and

Ben gave me a little book by Emil Brunner called "My Faith," which the great 20th century theologian had written for his young son; in that "terrifying possibility of being able" the meaning of the Creeds and Christianity were opened to me as if for the first time---and I know that "there something more" within me and knew it was the voice of Jesus after all. "Listen to me!"

Two years later, when I was very ill and in the hospital with Pneumonia, Mr. Perkins was one of my visitors and brought me a really awesome gift---a

box of three golf balls from the Blue Hills Club shop.

I was too sick to thank him. But they meant the world to me and I kept them in a special place throughout the years.

Mr. Perkins attended each of my ordinations, as Deacon and Priest, and, about 15 years ago, I learned that he was ill with dementia in a Roanoke nursing home.

He was not able to communicate very well and I'm not sure he ever recognized me but I brought the box of golf balls to his room. When he saw them, his face lit up with the light of Moses or Jesus and he had the biggest smile—and somehow I felt he knew; he just knew. I left the balls in his room.

It was fitting to do so. They symbolized his great gift to me: the permission to doubt, to question, to move to new places in our relationship with God; but such was even more than this.

That I could be a loyal member of the Christian faith with an absolutely free mind—trusting that God will always be the ultimate end of the honest search for truth. And above all, trusting that I could listen to Jesus, if not to the Church—and always know that I was beloved—and welcomed—as an acolyte—or a Priest—especially as a Christian.

Sometimes, when I am wrestling with stuff that might keep me in the tents on the mountain, rather than towards the new life Jesus desires for me, I do think of a golf ball, and that day on hole number three at Blue Hills, and the many mentors and true Christian spiritual guides in my life who have taught me—Listen to Jesus. Listen to Jesus.

Mr. Perkins—you were right. I'm glad I listened to you.

Amen.