

Luke 9:28 - 43

I read mystery stories, detective stories, because I like to have chaos resolved into order. It just soothes my spirit, to know that a story will follow this formula in which a terrible and unexplainable situation exists and by the end, it will all make sense and blame will be properly allocated and justice will be done. Sometimes, though, a story betrays me by surprising me and upsetting my expectations. (I actually tucked a note into one library book when I returned it, saying, "This is NOT a mystery!") Recently I read one that follows a Romanian girl who lives on the streets of Bucharest who is picked up by a human organ-trafficking ring and taken to England where they intend to kill her for her liver. Parallel to her story is the story of the English mother of a teenage girl with liver failure, who is battling unthinkable odds to get her daughter a liver transplant. I could see where it was going, and I could tell the ending was not going to be happy even if the organ traffickers were caught, but I could not tell which girl was going to survive. And I couldn't tell, because neither possibility was a satisfactory resolution that would restore order out of the chaos. It was sort of unimaginable.

A contemporary rabbi, Amy Robertson, describes taking a class in graduate school on the Qur'an. She said she struggled and struggled to understand it, and just couldn't get a fix on it until finally her professor told her, "Let it wash over you. Stop trying to process every piece of information that comes in, but take it in."

Something like that is happening to the disciples on the mountaintop with Jesus and Moses and Elijah. Earlier Jesus had sent the disciples out in pairs to do the same work he does, and they'd come back. Then Jesus had questioned them about who people say he is, and Peter had recognized him as the messiah. Now he's taken Peter, John and James up to the mountain

where he's praying and they're fighting off sleep. Suddenly Jesus is transfigured, bathed in radiance, and Moses and Elijah appear and talk with him. The disciples literally have no categories in their minds to put this experience into. They cannot understand what they are seeing.

Peter makes a noble attempt—some sort of stab at showing hospitality, maybe, when he proposes building dwellings for the three of them. But that's not right. A cloud—the presence of God—overshadows them all, and God says, “This is my Son, the Chosen; *listen to him.*” It's sort of an echo of God's affirmation of Jesus at his baptism, only that was a private affirmation that only Jesus heard. This one is addressed to the disciples, and in those words, “listen to him,” I hear God saying, “Let it wash over you. Don't try to process this information but let it sink in.” “Just listen.”

Now I'm going to do exactly what God says not to do, because I think Luke wants me to, and process some information. Moses and Elijah: Israel's pre-eminent prophets, both of whom experienced rejection from their own people. Moses, on Mt. Nebo, from which he could see the promised land, learned from God how he would die. Elijah did not die, but was carried away into heaven in a chariot. Jesus is talking with Moses and Elijah about “his departure,” in Greek, his “exodus.” Jesus is going to die without seeing the completion of his mission, as Moses did. He is also going to be assumed into heaven after the resurrection, as Elijah was. There is a holding together of horror and promise—Jesus' prospective death and the failure of his ministry; and also some intimations of Elijah-like glory. The disciples cannot process all this.

We see Jesus' frustration in the next section of the story, when the father of the child with a demon appeals to him to cast it out, saying that he had asked the disciples to help but

they were unable to. “You faithless and perverse generation,” Jesus explodes, “how much longer must I be with you and bear with you?” He casts the demon out of the boy, but that doesn’t solve the larger problem of how these disciples are going to carry on his ministry when he’s gone. All the time he’s spent teaching them, the power he’s tried to confer on them, and they seem utterly incapable of picking up his mantle. Peter, James and John couldn’t process what they saw on top of the mountain, and the others couldn’t exercise the authority Jesus had given them while they waited at the bottom of the mountain. Jesus himself is headed for calamity, and nothing he’s worked on is turning out.

When God says, “Listen to him,” God is saying, “Take it all in. Let it wash over you. Hold it, even if you don’t understand it.” Luke is telling us that the disciples—and we—have to hold the contradiction of Jesus’ messiahship and certain glory together with his inglorious defeat, the utter inadequacy of his disciples and his movement, and his painful death. The disciples certainly don’t have categories for this in their heads, and I’m not sure we do either. But they can at least *listen* and stay with the contradictions.

The Rev. Robert Chase, a UCC minister who worked in the national offices for quite a while, later became director of an agency called Intersections, whose mandate is to bring people together who differ, to forge common ground for justice, reconciliation and peace. In other words, they hold contradictory things together. Or they bring them together, anyway. He tells the story of one conference that was designed to bring US religious leaders together with religious leaders from Pakistan. Two of the Pakistani participants were Salafi Muslims, adherents of a conservative interpretation of Islam, and their pre-conference conversation revealed considerable distrust of and anxiety about Jews and Judaism.

As it happened, on the first evening, during an ice-breaking scenic boat ride, these two conservative Muslims sat next to an American Orthodox rabbi, and they really hit it off. By the end of the gathering, one of them, Amir, thanked everybody but especially this rabbi who, he said, had mentored him like a father. He choked up, and it was evident that this had been a transformational experience. They had held contradictory things together and had been transformed.

So that's what we have to do. We have to see it all, even the parts we resist because they don't fit into our narrative. Jesus' full glory will be revealed in the most terrible thing that happens to him, right? Standing there with Moses, who never made it into the promised land, who died having failed to complete his mission, and talking with Moses about his own "exodus," Jesus is also standing with Elijah, who was swept off into heaven in a chariot of fire, whose mantle was picked up by the redoubtable Elisha of the many healings and miracles. Jesus is going to die ignominiously and leave his mission to be picked up by a bunch of deer-in-the-headlights who don't seem to have learned one. single. thing. from their time with him. Just because you're seeing failures and misunderstandings does not mean that God is not at work. God is at work in glory and in terror. We just don't always have the categories in our heads to know how to process what we are seeing.

When I think about the challenges we're coping with, it seems like they've all gone on for so long. The pandemic, obviously. Dysfunction in our government, national and state. The debacle of the Warren County courthouse, for heaven's sake. Climate change. But to frame it that way is to assume a framework in which there are problems and there are solutions. We see the problems, we don't see the solutions. Maybe that's not the right framework, and we've

got our categories wrong. Maybe instead there are terrible things and there are glorious things, and God is acting in both of them for the healing of creation. Let me close with a poem by David Ray called "Thanks, Robert Frost."

Do you have hope for the future?  
someone asked Robert Frost, toward the end.  
*Yes, and even for the past*, he replied,  
*that it will turn out to have been all right*  
*for what it was*, something we can accept,  
mistakes made by the selves we had to be,  
not able to be, perhaps, what we wished,  
or what looking back half the time it seems  
we could so easily have been, or ought . . .  
The future, yes, and even for the past,  
that it will become something we can bear.  
And I too, and my children, so I hope,  
will recall as not too heavy the tug  
of those albatrosses I sadly placed  
upon their tender necks. *Hope for the past*,  
yes, old Frost, your words provide that courage,  
and it brings strange peace that itself passes  
into past, easier to bear because  
you said it, rather casually, as snow  
went on falling in Vermont years ago.

Let us pray.

Dazzling One,  
In blinding light you showed your disciples a hint of your power and purpose. Reveal yourself to us today. Show us what you desire of us and how to broadcast your love to the world, for the sake of the one who keeps company with the prophets Moses and Elijah, Jesus Christ our Lord.  
Amen.