

A HEAVENLY INTERLUDE IN THE DAILY ROUND

Transfiguration – Cycle C: Exodus 34:29-35; Luke 9:28-43a

Every once in a while, there is almost more grace in an experience than I can bear. It always seems to catch me by surprise, because it happens when it happens: the circumstances and timing vary; and although people are usually involved, I never know in advance who or how many. They are real experiences, though, not figments of my imagination, because the grace component is undeniable to everyone involved. And although I can remember for you only the times when I've been involved, my guess is that you will be able to relate to these situations; that you, too, have had what I like to think of as "heavenly interludes" in the midst of ordinary day-to-day routines; heavenly interludes in the daily round.

If I were to try and describe some of the internal dynamics of what others have called "mountaintop experiences" – a reference, by the way, to the character of the stories in our two bible readings today – I would have to say that love is present, there is openness and trust, a feeling of timelessness, and an awareness that this moment is different from the moments that preceded it and the ones that will follow. The word "holy" applies; and perhaps even the word "mystical". Earlier this week, we were discussing in Confirmation class Moses' experience of God's call to him from the burning bush as a mystical experience. The bush burned, but was not consumed; and Moses heard God's voice asking him to do what he considered to be impossible; to re-enter Egypt, confront the pharaoh, and prepare the Hebrew people for an exodus from their oppressive life among the Egyptians. You and I may not see burning bushes, but God still calls us to use our gifts for the benefit of others; and if we find that we run out of excuses for not answering God's call to help someone or serve in an organization whose purpose is help groups of people, is that experience any less mystical than a bush that burns and is not consumed? If two enemies reconcile after years of alienation, is that any less mystical than Jacob's wrestling with God at the ford of the Jabok? If, in the midst of loneliness we find companionship, is our experience any less mystical than Joseph's reunion with his family after their years of separation – Joseph in Egypt and the rest of his family in Canaan?

Sometimes we hesitate to name our experiences as holy or mystical. We think of such things as happening to others, or as happening long ago when the world was much different, much more innocent. But grace is timeless and boundless; and all we really need to be able to name some of our experiences as exhibiting the marks of heaven is a mustard seed of faith (as Jesus described it); enough faith to enable us to connect the dots and see the outline of the hand of God in our experience – calling, guiding, saving, healing, and redeeming.

When I began as the pastor of this congregation in 1994, one of the non-negotiables in my call, I soon found out, was attending the monthly meeting of the Lutheran Adult Fellowship. The LAF group, as we called it, was our seniors group; but they didn't want their name to suggest that what they had in common was that they were over 65. LAF was a lovely acronym, because our meetings were full of laughter. This isn't to say that they didn't cry together, or that there weren't struggles; but I soon learned that whenever we got together, it was a heavenly interlude in the daily round. The meetings included games and stories, a light lunch, and a period of prayer. In my mind's eye, everyone glowed whenever we met. There was love and openness, and because of Ruth Gaiser's spontaneous remission from cancer in the context of community prayer meetings held in her family room, there was abundant faith in the power and presence of God.

I mention this example, because there are many in our congregation who still remember the Lutheran Adult Fellowship and the heavenly character of virtually every gathering. I even felt a little like Moses at one point, as I resisted getting my bus driver's license in order to take them on excursions. But they had their way with me, and I must say that it was grace that kept us safe through the thousands of kilometres we travelled in the LAFmobile. We covered a lot of territory over the years and saw many things most Ontarians only hear about or read about.

But I have felt that same presence of the heavenly just in talking with someone, in playing with children, in the time apart we enjoy with our youth at Confirmation Camp each year, in hospital visits and home visits; in the sojourn Paula and I enjoy with the people of St. John's, Gourcock each July; and truthfully, throughout my 19 years here as your pastor in Christ. When I write annual reports and celebrate our

anniversaries, and use terms such as “years of grace” and “landmark years”, I use those terms because I see this congregation as deeply blessed. When Jacob had a vision of angels ascending and descending the ladder to heaven, he exclaimed, “Surely the Lord is in this place.” My experience and, I hope, our experience of this congregation is no less. We are blessed, deeply blessed. God is here – calling us, guiding us, saving us, forming us, re-forming us, redeeming us; through the power of the gospel; in the power of the Holy Spirit.

Jesus’ transfiguration in the presence of Peter, James, and John was a heavenly interlude and, in Luke’s telling of the story, an interlude in stark contrast with what followed. When they fail to heal the boy with convulsions, Jesus comes closer to losing it with his disciples than he comes anywhere else in the gospels.

But I appreciate what Luke does here. He tells it as it is. Day to day, we live in ordinary time; in good times and bad; in sickness and in health; in plenty and in want. We struggle and succeed, work and play, accomplish and fail. And I expect that if there is any pre-condition for faith, it is our immersion in ordinary time; because when Grace does walk in the door and smack us on the lips, we are inclined to notice this heavenly interlude. Like Peter, we want it to go on forever – Peter wanted to build three shelters for Jesus, Moses, and Elijah; Peter wanted to be able to establish heaven there and then. It is interesting to me that Jesus never has a chance to respond to Peter. The cloud of God’s presence overshadows them and they receive God’s guidance for this moment. It is the final epiphany; the epiphany the disciples will need in order to make sense of what will happen Easter morning.

We have a different perspective than Peter, James, and John. We live on this side of the Resurrection; we know not only how Jesus’ story ends, but how our story has been changed because of Jesus’ story. Jesus’ transfiguration is our call to live the risen life; to realize that a good measure of heaven is present here and now; to recognize that ordinary time is just that, and not let it pull us down. Congregational deficits, roof leaks, Koinonia feeling as if it has run out of options: these are all marks of ordinary time. We live in it, and we live through it. But there is also heaven – good things happening we couldn’t have planned or predicted: new members, new ideas, new possibilities, new ministry; a return to health; joy, happiness, life. Grace when we least expect it; heavenly interludes in the daily round.