

Staying Present

February 27, 2022

Intersections

The magnificence of the Gospel passage that I just read for us, Luke's version of the Transfiguration, is easily lost on us today. We hear the story of Jesus and his closest followers going up a mountain to pray, and his face becoming radiant, much like Moses' face did in the Exodus passage that Ed read for us, and his clothes becoming dazzling white, much like images we'll hear at Easter Time from the tomb.

The experience of the cloud invokes numerous stories in the Old Testament, when the Jewish people experienced God's presence in a cloud. And we can't forget Moses and Elijah are present. With Moses as the central figure of so much of the first five books of the Bible, often called "the law," and Elijah as the prophet who Jewish people of Jesus' time believed would return to usher in the new age, this mountaintop experience is exactly that. It's a pinnacle, mind-blowing in its power.

Today, we celebrate the end of the season of Epiphany in the church. It's often called the "season of light," because it starts with the star that the wise people followed at the end of the Christmas story, and ends today, with Jesus radiance. So, as we end this season of light, my original plan was to talk with you about disco balls. You remember those, right? The spheres that hung in dance clubs in the '70s that were made of hundreds of one- or two-inch squares of mirrors. I thought it could be a fun, lighthearted image that would stick with us, to imagine ourselves, our church, as facets on a disco ball, each one of us reflecting God's light.

But then, we learned of Vladimir Putin invading Ukraine.

So much of what I've heard and read from people is fear and disbelief and despair and helplessness. So many are expressing rage and disempowerment and a fierce protectiveness that feels neutered because it has nowhere to go, and all of this on top of the pandemic exhaustion and tension we were already carrying.

And so, while the lighthearted disco ball image may not resonate this year, I do think our Gospel passage gives us some powerful tools for this place and time in human history, particularly, if we look at the context of the passage. In Luke, our reading today comes immediately after Jesus has told his disciples that he must undergo great suffering and be killed, "Then he said to them all, 'If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will save it.'" (Luke 9:23-24)

Then when they came down the mountain, Jesus turned toward Jerusalem, and all of the struggle and horror that awaited there. It is between these bookends that Luke tells us of the transfiguration, between the foretelling of Jesus' suffering and then turning to meet his destiny.

There are a couple of reasons that I think this is interesting for us today. Amidst the struggles and traumas and hardships of what has been, and the fears of what will be, God invites us up the

mountain. God invites us to bask in divine splendor. God invites us to recharge with the magnificence of wonder and awe and connectedness to the past and future.

Aisling Richmond, a therapist who grew up in Northern Ireland amidst the Troubles, offers some psycho-spiritual wisdom as folks seek to navigate Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Foremost, she recommends being present to your feelings. I know that for some of you this sounds like hokey, but hear me out.

Part of what we are doing when we stay present to our feelings, especially those we would often name as negative – hurt, anger, helplessness, and such – rather than disassociating or turning away from them, is we are taking the first step toward breaking, “the vicious cycle of trauma’s actions and reactions.” Again, I know some of you are rolling your eyes, but “Unresolved conflict has trauma at its root, and we need only to listen to Putin’s language about Ukraine being a Nazi state to know that his actions are in part created by the pain of the past.” (Richmond)

When Mark Twain said, “history doesn’t repeat itself, but often it rhymes,” he was keying in to this dynamic. The trauma that we inflict has, at its root, unresolved conflict within ourselves, and therefore it is psycho-spiritually critical for us to acknowledge what we are feeling in times like this, in an attempt to break the cycle of trauma’s actions and reactions. Richmond, then, encourages us to ask ourselves what is supporting us right now.

In our Gospel passage, this could be Moses and Elijah and all of the familiar symbols of their faith. Peter and James and John are being reminded that, even though the road ahead of them is not going to be easy, they have all of the resources of the faith of their ancestors to fall back on. Richmond also encourages us to ask what it is about this current experience that feels familiar. What does it evoke from our past? Again, acknowledging this can be a powerful tool in breaking cycles. Critical to this is compassion, especially toward ourselves.

With compassion and curiosity, we can give ourselves a footing for stably being the change we wish to see in the world, a footing for existing differently ourselves, and therefore existing differently in the world. So much of the conflict in this world arises from the unequal and abusive power structures that we’ve been talking the last few weeks about Jesus working to dismantle. Biologist Elisabet Sahtouris suggests, “The aggressive and destructive motives of domination, conquest, control, and profit have been presented to us as unchangeable human nature by historians as well as by sociologists. But mounting evidence from archaeology strongly suggests that human societies were, for the greater part of civilized history, based more on cooperation and reverence for life and nature than on competition and obsession with death and technology.”

Conclusion

Friends, at the end of the day, what Richmond is suggesting when she encourages us to sit with and acknowledge our own trauma as a response to Russia’s war on Ukraine is that healing begins with us. That each one of us, the world over, needs to do the hard work of personal transformation and healing from our past hurts if we are going to embody something different in the world. The world needs us. Our God needs us.

While, in the light of war in Ukraine (and my activist friends would disown me if I didn't mention that there's been a war raging in Yemen for some time now that hasn't drawn nearly the attention that it should) my disco ball image may seem a little too flippant, but I think it may still have some merit. No one of us is going to transform Vladimir Putin and his maniacal lust to wield power. But we all can transform our own ways of wielding power, and in doing so, reflect God's divine light, the source of our goodness and strength, back into this weary world.

In our Gospel, Peter wanted to set up dwellings for Jesus, Moses, and Elijah on the mountaintop, but Jesus wasn't having that, and instead, fortified with the faith of their ancestors, and the reminder that they are God's beloved, they headed back down the mountain, into the complexities and the struggles of life. They went back into their workaday world, but they were different; they reflected God's light and healing and grace.

My prayer this week is for people the world over who are facing the horrors of war and all other struggles and traumas. May the people of God have the grace to reflect the divine light into their lives, even if it's only two little square inches at a time. No one of us will change the world, but as I pray so often, the world can know God better by knowing us. May it be so. Alleluia, and Amen.

Rev. Bridget Flad Daniels
Union Congregational United Church of Christ
Green Bay, Wisconsin
Exodus 34:29-35, Luke 9:28-36
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