

Transfigured!

A friend of mine just returned from a conference in Denver, put on by *The Hearing Voices Network* which I had never heard of before. Wikipedia says the networks are “[peer](#)-focused national organizations for people who hear voices (commonly referred to in western culture as [auditory hallucinations](#)) and supporting family members, activists and mental health practitioners. Members may or may not have a [psychiatric](#) diagnosis. Networks promote an alternative approach, where voices are not necessarily seen as signs of [mental illness](#). Networks regard hearing voices as a meaningful and understandable, although unusual, human variation.^[1] In themselves voices are not seen as the problem. Rather it is the relationship the person has with their voices that is regarded as the main issue.^[2]” My friend related to me that the Network was started when a psychiatric patient said to her doctor, “Why is it that when I tell you I hear a voice you call me ill but when the ancients heard a voice they called God they were made saints?”

The writers of the Torah wanted to make it clear that Moses, indeed, had a very special relationship with the voice he heard – and it *was* the voice of God! And, clearly, the writer of Luke wanted his readers to understand that it was the voice of God speaking to Peter, James and John. In all three of the Synoptic Gospels, Matthew, Mark and Luke, we read these two stories back to back – the story of Jesus’ transfiguration and the story of his healing the boy with the demon. Why are these two stories so important? And why is it important that they’re presented together in the Gospels? I’d like to share thoughtful reflections on this that I read and resonated with this week, by a woman named Debie Thomas.

“On the mountain, a man bent in prayer (is suddenly engulfed in dazzling light). As glory (pours out of him), three sleepy disciples cower in the grass and watch their Master glow. Two figures appear out of time and space; in solemn tones they speak of exodus, accomplishment, Jerusalem. The disciples, comprehending nothing, babble nonsense in response – ‘Let’s make tents! Let’s stay here always! This is good!’ A cloud descends, thick and impenetrable. As it envelops the disciples, they fall on their faces, certain the end has come. But a Voice addresses them instead, tender and gentle. ‘This is my Son, my Chosen.’ The Voice hums with delight, and the disciples, braver now, look up. They gaze at their Master – the Shining One – and (the Creator’s) pure joy sings with the stars. ‘This is my Beloved Son. Listen to him.’

In the valley, a boy writhes in the dust. He drools, he cannot hear, and his eyes – wide open, feral – see nothing but darkness. Around him a crowd gathers and swells, eager for a spectacle. Scribes jeer, and disciples wring their hands. ‘Frauds!’ someone yells. ‘Charlatans!’ ‘Where’s your Master?’, the scribes ask the disciples. ‘Why has he left you?’ ‘We don’t know,’ the disciples mutter, gesturing vaguely at the mountain. Panic wars with exhaustion as they hear the boy shriek yet again – an echo straight from hell. He flails, his limbs (behave independently from the rest of his body). A voice, strangled, singular – rends the night. ‘This is my son!’ a man cries out as he pushes through the crowd to gather the convulsing boy into his arms. Everyone stares as the father cradles the wreck of a child against his chest. ‘Please,’ he sobs to the stars. ‘This is my beloved son. Listen to him.’

It's Transfiguration Sunday, she continues. The (high point) of the liturgical season we call Epiphany. After weeks of hints and (clues), today we stand in full, (dazzling) light, basking in the glory of the Beloved. Today we hear the very voice of God.

All the Synoptic Gospels tell the story of the Transfiguration, underscoring its importance to the early church, and all of them end their accounts with the narrative of the 'demon-possessed' boy. Not as a postscript, but as a 'meanwhile'. 'Here's what was happening down below while Jesus turned bleachy on the hilltop.'

So why do we tell the story so differently? Why do we treat the Transfiguration as the main event, and the boy's story, if we mention it at all, as a sidebar?

Over the centuries, the Transfiguration has accumulated meanings, most of them (densely) theological. After all, that's what we humans do; we take the (indescribable) and insist on (trying to describe it).

I was taught, she writes, that the Transfiguration is important because it does the following: it reveals Christ's divine nature, confirms his Sonship, foreshadows his death, secures his place in the stream of Israel's salvific history, exalts him above the Law (Moses) and the Prophets (Elijah), and prefigures his Resurrection.

Weighty stuff. I rarely heard the sick boy's parallel story mentioned, though, and if it was, it was only to (emphasize) a spiritual point that 'mountaintop experiences' aren't meant to last. If the bumbling Peter thought it would be cool to pitch a permanent tent on Mount Glory, then the sick boy functioned as a convenient corrective: 'No, Peter, that's actually *not* the plan. You can't stay up there; the world needs you. Get down.'

I don't have any particular arguments with Transfiguration theology – it (just) leaves me cold. Maybe this is because my eyes aren't on the clouds this year; they're pretty earthbound. So here's what I'd like to know; how does glory on the mountain speak to agony in the valley? What does it mean that they share a landscape? Can a love song on a pinnacle reach a scream in the depths? What happens if it can't? Aren't there *two* beloved sons in this story?

I have no idea how the crowd at the base of the mountain experienced the Transfiguration. Did Jesus' fierce light cast even a single beam downwards to those who waited in the dark? Did the crowd glimpse the ominous cloud that descended over Peter, James and John? Did they hear even a rumble – distant like thunder – when God spoke of his Chosen One? We'll never know.

What we know is that Jesus invited three disciples – only three – up the mountain. What we know is that the remaining nine spent the night in anxious futility, trying in vain to do their Master's good work as the stakes rose higher and higher. What we know is that the scene soon became tense and ugly – a breeding ground for anger, shame, despair, and doubt. What we know is that an anguished father and broken son suffered mightily, even as the heavens broke open above their heads. What we know is that many people who needed Jesus that night experienced only the ache of his absence – while a select few reached a pinnacle and basked in glory.

I tend to interpret the Bible as if its stories apply only to me – *me*, an individual. *My* mountain-top experience. *My* valley. *My* relationship with God. But this is so misguided. So dangerous. The truth is that my mountain lies right next to your valley. The truth is that your pain does not cancel out my joy. The truth is that it is entirely possible for you to sit in church on Sunday morning and bask in the sweet presence of God’s Spirit – while one pew over (someone else) cries their eyes out because the ache of God’s absence feels unbearable.

The same applies if (we) widen the lens. Do we not – in the privileged West – occupy so many mountains, while our brothers and sisters in other parts of the world dwell in valleys of hunger, warfare, violence, and abuse? Do we not at the same time experience valleys peculiar to modern 21st century life – isolation, anxiety, depression, frenzy – while many who have less by way of material comfort enjoy the mountain-tops of more nourishing cultural traditions and communities?”

Debi Thomas came to the end of her reflections by writing, “To say this is all unfair is completely beside the point – it is the world (in which) we live. And so here’s the great challenge to the Christian life – the great challenge to the Church, (the body of) Christ; can we speak glory to agony, and agony to glory? Can we hold the mountain and the valley in faithful tension with each other – denying neither, embracing both? Can we do this hard, hard work out of pure love for each other, so that no one among us – not the joyous one, not the anguished one, not the beloved one, not the broken one – is ever truly alone?”

I don’t know Debi Thomas’ congregation or context, but I want to give witness to her challenge and questions. My grateful testimony is that this congregation DOES know how to hold faithful paradoxes and we DO do the hard work of loving each other. I’ve watched it happen as you’ve done it with and for one another and I’ve experienced it many times as you’ve done it with and for us.

Maybe my friend and her colleagues in *The Hearing Voices Network* have it exactly right. Maybe the most important thing is to acknowledge the voices that we hear, the experiences that we have, the ways God comes to us, the ways God feels absent from us. And without assigning judgment, simply share the journey, bask together in the dazzling light and endure together the dark suffering.

Debi Thomas wraps up her sermon. “With Transfiguration Sunday, we come to the end of another liturgical season. Having seen the light of Epiphany, we prepare now for the darkness of Lent. I don’t know what voices will speak to us in the wilderness. Maybe you’ll hear glory. Maybe I’ll hear agony. Maybe we’ll hear each other. But whatever you hear, don’t flinch. Don’t flee. Both voices need to speak. Both voices have much to teach us. So just listen. Both voices are beloved.”

The hymn of response is number 551 in the hymnal.

Sources:

Feasting on the Word; Year C Vol. 1

<http://journeywithjesus.net/essays/813-the-view-from-the-valley>