

Text: Matthew 17:1-9
Title: Shining Through
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Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers is a highly regarded book of research and commentary about adolescent spirituality that was released in 2005. In it the authors coin the phrase “Moralistic Therapeutic Deism” to describe the common religious beliefs of American adolescents. I don’t know if the research had staying power but the phrase took hold. Moralistic Therapeutic Deism has become short hand for our spiritual milieu. It can be summarized this way:

1. *A God exists who created and orders the world and watches over human life on earth.*
2. *God wants people to be good, nice, and fair to each other, as taught in the Bible and by most world religions.*
3. *The central goal of life is to be happy and to feel good about oneself.*
4. *God does not need to be particularly involved in one’s life except when God is needed to resolve a problem.*
5. *Good people go to heaven when they die.*

There’s a warm-fuzzy-feel to that way of thinking about God. It makes room for good people (us), our wellbeing is of utmost importance, and God is there to help. And in that gauzy light sermons are spiritual pep talks to help us navigate this messed-up-morally-murky-world. In that framework religion serves to comfort and encourage and offer practical guidelines for how to be happy and healthy....

And I like that.
God helps me; I help God.
Life is good.
And all dogs go to heaven.

But then, along comes this morning’s text, and it’s strange and bizarre and nothing like the world I know. And it’s easy to dismiss as some manner of metaphor or an inconsequential-antiquated-otherworldly-outlier. There’s nothing here for us. Keep moving.

But....

But, if we want something more than Moralistic Therapeutic Deism maybe a text like this should pique our curiosity or demand our attention. If God is bigger than our own self-interest than maybe there’s something here.

What are we to make of this vignette?
Does it have anything to say to us?

The story has a cinematic feel that stirs your inner Steven Spielberg: Jesus leads three trusted friends up a rugged-rocky-mountain to a place where the membrane between heaven and earth is thin, and there his face begins to shine like the sun, his clothes

become whiter than white, and time morphs – for Moses and Elijah, each of different centuries, appear not as silent apparitions but as partners in conversation with this blazing Jesus.

For comedic relief, blustery-bumbling-Peter (think of him as Will Ferrell) wants to mark the moment by building shelters, only to have it all swallowed up in a bright cloud out of which thunders the voice of God.

As their knees give way, Peter, James and John melt into the ground. The King James Version has it that they were “sore afraid.” Afraid to look, afraid to speak, afraid to breathe, afraid to believe, afraid to be....

And then, just as suddenly as the veil was pulled back, it closes. Jesus walks over, stoops down, and puts his hand gently on his friend’s shoulders whispering, “Get up; don’t be afraid.”

Stunned and staggered they un-scrunch their eyes, wipe the fog away, and look around for some mist, or flakes of light, or maybe a singed bush. Even the faint smell of a holy smoke would help.

What just happened?

What does it mean?

How will they explain it to their friends?

How will they explain it to themselves?

Dear friends, in part, the transfiguration is meant to illumine the continuation of God’s activity through the line of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and David. It overlaps and echoes multiple Old Testament passages. It is the Old Testament collapsed and condensed. It is what Barbara Brown Taylor calls:

...the Mount Rushmore of heaven ~ the Lawgiver, the Prophet, and the Messiah ~ wrapped in such glory it is a wonder the other three could see them at all.

In full Technicolor, Matthew is proclaiming that Jesus of Nazareth is unmistakably the new Moses, the Anointed of God, the Messiah, and the fulfillment of every last jot and tittle of the law and the prophets.

In the Gospel of Matthew there are a variety of high points where the identity of Jesus is proclaimed. From the baptism of Jesus where God speaks:

This is my Son, whom I love, with him I am well pleased.

To this mountain top announcement where God says the same thing, to the cross and the torn curtain in the temple, to the last mountain where Jesus says to his disciples:

All authority on heaven and earth has been given to me. Therefore, as you are going, make disciples of all nations, baptizing them... and teaching them to obey all that I have commanded you. And surely, I am with you always...

In each of those high peak moments Matthew is proclaiming that Jesus is the face of God in this world. Each of those moments illumine the face of God.

If you want to see God look in the face of Jesus – the very glory of God is shining through his skin. In Jesus, the image of God is not fuzzy or smudged, not diluted, diminished, or defective, but clear, unmistakable, and self-authenticating. And I don't know where else to look to see God as clearly.

A few years ago, I stayed in a monastery and met a monk. He was quick to smile, gentle of spirit, and there was some manner of glory shining through him. I thought given more time together we could be good friends.

I asked him if he could describe his experience with God. Did he have an experiential existential certainty of God's presence? Clear, unmistakable and self-authenticating?

He paused for a long time, looked over my shoulder through the window at the winter sky, took off his glasses, and said that it "went away." One day for no apparent reason his sense of the presence of God went away. And it stayed away for a few days, and then a few weeks, a few months, a few years....

That was not what I was hoping to hear.

And yet he kept doing what monks do.

He joined in the work of the community, he told the truth, he gathered for prayer and worship five times a day six days a week. And then one day he experienced God again.

Today, he said, his sense of God comes and goes, but he knows the glory of God to shine through the simple gifts of each day – sunlight through the trees, the sound of birds, breath, the love and laughter of friends.

I guess I thought that someone who lived with that intimate practice of prayer, worship and meditation would know something clearer of God. But, what struck me was not his story of the absence of God but that even in that absence he kept doing what he knew to do. Even without feeling God he kept listening to scripture, praying, giving himself to others, and looking to Jesus. He just kept looking to Jesus. He just kept listening to Jesus.

There is an odd moment midstream in the transfiguration when Peter is hollering into the light about putting up tents. And while there are echoes here to Hebrew history, what Peter really wants to do is capture the moment. He wants to capture this clear image of God shining in the face of Jesus. And yet....

And yet, the "true folly" (Scott Hoezee) of Peter's suggestion is that what he wants to capture has been with him from the very first day that Jesus walked up to his fishing boat.

In the first chapter of the Gospel of John the same word for tenting or dwelling is used to describe what God is doing in the Word made flesh. There was no need to build a tent; God had already set up his tent in the flesh of Jesus. And, if God is clearly illumined

when Jesus' face is glowing, then God is clearly illumined when Jesus touches the disciples' shoulders and they look up from the dirt to see his familiar face – flat, human, with no residual glow.

God is clearly illumined when Jesus looks over Jerusalem and weeps.

God is clearly illumined when Jesus teaches.

God is clearly illumined when Jesus breaks bread with friends.

God is clearly illumined when Jesus suffers on the cross.

God is clearly illumined when Jesus breathes his last.

God is clearly illumined when Jesus walks out of the tomb.

And that cuts through the warm-fuzzy-light of Moralistic Therapeutic Deism. There is an alarming clarity to the face of God expressed in Jesus. It is not amorphous or vaguely comforting, but it is troubling and terrifying in its specificity. And yet somehow it is also hopeful, human, and full of light. And it demands some response, some wrestling, some relationship. The specificity of God as expressed in Jesus shines through even the moralism and devotional therapy that passes as faith....

So, dear friends, let us do what we know to do, let us keep coming back to look for God
in the face of Jesus,
in the baptism of Jesus,
in the teaching of Jesus,
in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus,
in the sacramental memory of Jesus,
in the community of Jesus.

Whether in church or classroom or funeral home or doctor's office or AA meeting or
lonely restless night, in those moments when the air is thin....

if you are looking for God,

if want something more than moralistic therapeutic deism,

if you want to encounter God – look to Jesus.

In the words of Fleming Rutledge:

Even as the preacher stands before you bent and crippled by sin like all the rest of humanity, the message is that the light of redemption has dawned upon us all in the journey of the Son of God through death into life. It is true on the brilliant days but even more true on the cloudy ones when faith is tested and hope is nearly dead: the very glory of God shines in the face of Jesus of Nazareth. He dies and he shines for you.

Or better said by God:

*This is my Son, whom I love, with him I am well pleased.
Listen to him.*

Amen.