

March 6, 2011

The Last Sunday after Epiphany

Matthew 17.1-9

All Saints' Episcopal Church, Atlanta, Georgia

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Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* is a classic children's tale of sense-from-no-sense. I spent a short time of my own childhood fascinated by the book (I've never seen any of the movies) and I am looking forward to reading it to my own kids. Rabbit holes, talking cards, cabbages and kings, Carroll's story is silly and mysterious and marvelous... and full of curious and unexpected wisdom.

At one point, as the frantic and harried White Rabbit is passing through yet again, he instructs the oft-confused Alice to "don't just do something, stand there!" It is a comic moment in the story, one that we can all identify with, all of us who have been told at one time or another to use our time more efficiently, to get going, speed up, quite wasting time!

And from that context, this phrase is hilarious. Even at a young age, I remember thinking that this, this was funny. It was my growing brain's introduction to irony.

Don't just do something, stand there! Absurd, of course! Contrary to everything we are always told.

But this is also the message we're getting from this morning's Gospel.

Peter, James and John have gone up a high mountain with Jesus. Jesus is transfigured, transformed from normal-looking into a holy dazzling white, before the disciples. They are visited by two of the great prophets, Moses and Elijah.

Having no idea what this means, having no experience of this before and, ostensibly having never read *Alice's Adventures*, Peter gets to work. Quick, let's build something, let's honor something, let's DO SOMETHING!!

Peter could have many motives, but maybe one is the natural desire to make the experience of transformation into something more manageable, less unwieldy, more predictable. Peter is trying to have some control over the situation that is, by its very nature, uncontrollable.

How much easier to build those tents, enclosing and containing the experience in some way, rather than to stand still in the midst of that fantastic confusion, the love and the holy chaos that is God? How much easier to gather supplies, make a plan and get to work, to distract himself from what the event unfolding before him really means?

In the midst of his trying to do something, or at least figure out what in the world he is supposed to do, Peter more or less receives his answer:

He is interrupted by God.

He is interrupted by a sentence that sets the path of theological discourse for centuries. "This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!" God tells the disciples, and tells us, that we must listen to Jesus; we must keep on listening to him. It is a continual process, not something that can be enshrined.

Don't just do something! Stand there!

Stop your worrying, carrying on and nonsense. Look, listen!

Close your mouth, Peter, still your hands. God is telling you everything you need to know. Listen.

Bless his heart. I wouldn't trade places with him for all the teacakes in Alice's Wonderland.

Peter tries so hard to do what is right. He is trying to be a good host to these visitors, Elijah and Moses. He is responding in the best way he knows how to the presence of something important in front of him: by doing something, anything.

We've seen our biblical friends fall into this trap before, haven't we? Remember Mary and Martha? Mary is content to sit by Jesus feet and learn while Martha only knows that lunch isn't ready and the house is a mess. Trying so hard to honor Jesus with a good spread, she responds in the best way she knows how to the presence of something important in front of her: by doing something, anything. And Jesus stops her much in the same way: Martha, Martha, sit down and listen.

The message here is the same: there is so much to do. And even when there isn't much to do, we'll come up with something. It is much harder to still our hands, close our mouths and listen. Just pay attention to what God is doing in front of us.

Peter was lucky. The voice of God was loud and obvious. The time and place were set apart. The voice was easy to hear. There was no cacophony and no distraction. Peter had it easy and he still didn't get it right.

How much more difficult is it for us who do not have the advantage of a divine booming voice?

All of these distractions, all of the things that we are doing that fill our lives with sound and activity, there is a lot of it that serves to distract us from the voice of God patiently repeating: "This is my Son. Listen to him."

God is not calling us to stop everything completely and forever, to cease all work and play, to never utter a peep again. We have good and holy work to do in the world, after all. But we are called by this story to examine the work that we do, to separate the important from the fussing, the things that fulfill us, connect us and build up the kingdom from the things that get in the way of our relationships with one another and thus our relationship with God.

There is no private epiphany, no private transfiguration, no private transformation. They, and we, are transformed, transfigured, in community, community with one another and community across time, with the prophets and martyrs and across the planet, with our companions in Tanzania and Rio de Janeiro.

One of the hardest things about being in relationship with God or anyone is knowing when to work, talk and do and when to listen, to just stand there. That has been one of our greatest challenges as we negotiate our own parish relationships across the globe.

It is easy for us to "help," to build and send money, to collect things and offer advice. We know how to talk. We know how to build and organize and fundraise. It is much harder to hush our mouths and still our hands and stand there, Christians with Christians, listening for God's voice. That is when transformation takes place. Because our sisters and brothers know a lot, too, and somewhere between "us" and "them", there is a "we." And God lives there. We just have to listen for that voice.

And it may happen with some initial discomfort, because silence can feel weird. And it may happen with some fear, as it did with the disciples, upon hearing God's voice.

But it will happen. And when it does, we will be standing on holy ground, in the dwelling of God, the beloved.

We are on the precipice of the great chasm of Lent. We enter into this season, just as we do every year, with the desire to be transformed, to walk within a fuller awareness of God's purposes in the world and our place within these purposes. I wonder if this year you will carve out some time to listen in an intentional manner. You can call it prayer, you can call it meditation, but for heaven's sake, don't just do something, stand there.