

**GLIMPSES OF GLORY; EXODUS 24:12-18, 2PETER 1:16-21; MATTHEW 17:1-9;
TRANSFIGURATION SUNDAY, 2.26.17; THOMAS H. YORTY; WPC**

What sense do we make of today's readings that present such powerful encounters of Israel and then Jesus' disciples with a radiant, transcendent God? Transcendent, here, meaning as Webster defines it, "beyond the limits of possible experience."

And what do we take away from these stories to live our own lives in this modern, scientific world with its Spotify and soon driverless cars?

As I address those questions, I am thinking of a conversation I had last week with a friend of Westminster who is a man of science, a good soul, a person who loves his neighbor as himself, but when it comes to God he is, he says, an atheist. Biblical stories like these simply hold no relevance, appeal or value for him. Nor is our friend alone but represents many people, who may not call themselves atheists, but when it comes to a transcendent God are skeptical if not agnostic. So here's my plan: first, I will talk about the language we use to refer to God, then consider today's readings, and lastly how they apply to us.

British critic George Steiner on God language: We speak still of 'sunrise' and 'sunset'. We do so as if the Copernican model of the solar system had not replaced, ineradicably, the Ptolemaic. Vacant metaphors, eroded figures of speech, inhabit our vocabulary and grammar. They are caught, tenaciously, in the scaffolding and recesses of our common parlance. There they rattle about like old rags or ghosts in the attic.

This is the reason why rational men and women, particularly in the scientific and technological societies of the West, still refer to 'God'. And this is why the postulate of the existence of God persists in so many unconsidered turns of phrase and allusion.

No plausible reflection or belief underwrites His presence. Nor does any intelligible evidence. Where God clings to our culture, to our routines of discourse, He is a phantom of grammar, a fossil embedded in the childhood of rational speech.

This sermon, with the help of George Steiner, argues the reverse. It proposes that any coherent understanding of what language is and how language works, that any coherent account of the capacity of human speech to communicate meaning and feeling is, and can only be in the final analysis, *underwritten by the assumption of God's presence*, not the shrunken argument and flawed logic of God's absence.

Music, literature, and the arts embody the *necessary possibility* of this 'real presence'. The seeming paradox of a 'necessary possibility' is, exactly, what the artist is at liberty to explore and enact in words, colors, and sounds.

This is a wager on meaning and insight. When one human voice addresses another, when we come face to face with a stained glass window or hear a glorious improvisation on a hymn tune, or John Coltrane's "Love Supreme" which is to say when we encounter the other, the musician or painter or poet, in his or her freedom, we are making a wager on transcendence, on the real presence of God.

This wager, which is the wager of the biblical writers and today's stories, announces the presence of what Steiner the philosopher calls a "realness," a substantiation within language and form of something actual.

This wager supposes a passage, beyond the fictional or the purely pragmatic, from meaning to meaningfulness. The conjecture is that "God is," not because our grammar is outworn; but that grammar lives and generates worlds because there is the wager on God. The authentic experience of *understanding* when we are spoken to by another human being or a poem, is one of responsibility. We are *answerable* to the text, to the work of art, to the musical offering at a moral, spiritual and psychological level. It calls forth life from us.

What Steiner argues against is nihilism, the disappearance of authentic, individual human experience in a hyper-commodified, consumer-based society, dominated by the needs of huge corporations rather than small businesses. In our licensed social systems, the electronic volume and fidelity of vast data banks and processes of automatic retrieval weaken the sinews of individual memory. Stimulus and suggestion are increasingly mechanical and collective. "Algorithmic" is another word. What we eat, listen to, think about and say is increasingly determined for us – Pandora's Box, ironically named, is one example.

The task of our age, says Steiner, is to learn again to be human or more strictly – and here is the connection to today's readings – to learn anew what is comprised in daily experience and represented by the enigma of creation itself but made sensible.

Making mystery meaningful is the work of the poet, the painter, the jazz musician, or two persons in soulful conversation. Just yesterday I was talking with a friend about the Hawaiian singer Israel Kamakawiwo'ole's transcendent rendition of "Somewhere Over the Rainbow." It takes you to another place he said. Like Leonard Cohen's "Halleluiah" you can't sing that tune.

Today's Scripture lessons are quintessential illustrations of the capacity of humans, in this case the biblical writers, to convey the transcendent experience of God's presence.

Turn with me to the lessons. They communicate the power of God coming into human existence. Neither writer reports this event in simple or straightforward terms. They walk a line between language that is clear on the one hand, yet elusive enough on the other to honor the awe, splendor, hiddenness and mystery of God.

The larger context today is journey. In Exodus, Moses ascends the mountain with Joshua. They approach the summit, Joshua stays behind, Moses ascends. God descends in a cloud on the mountain, the seventh day, ***a voice calls*** to Moses, he enters and stays in the cloud forty days and forty nights.

Jesus, the new Moses in Matthew, takes his followers and ascends a mountain where he too is illumined. Moses and Elijah appear; they talk; Peter offers to build shrines. ***A voice*** from the cloud says, "This is my beloved son, with whom I am pleased, listen to him." The disciples fall down in awe but Jesus says, "Rise up! Do not be afraid,"; they see only Jesus who says to tell no one until he is raised from the dead.

The larger context today is *our journey*, the journey of God's people, Israel from Sinai into the wilderness and the disciples from Galilee to Jerusalem. Israel can no more remain at the base of Sinai indefinitely than the disciples can live out their lives in the hills of Galilee. They are each witness to something we are calling "the real presence; God's transcendence" that calls them to witness to this reality to others.

The form this power, this real presence takes for the people of Israel is in the tablets of the Law that Moses brings down from the mountain. For Peter, James and John this transcendent power and presence is in the confusing affirmation that Jesus will suffer and die and then be raised to life.

Both of these – the Law and its principles and values that will guide, protect and allow God's people to flourish; and the resurrection that ends death's reign of finality and fear – both of these breathe life, energy and freedom into the Hebrew tribe and the early church. These are animating forces; causal energy; the power of God itself that invades and inhabits the day to day world of human relationships and commitments and norms, values and conduct.

Israel's forty-year wilderness trek pushes them to their limits, they experience moments when their faith seems inadequate and they feel abandoned by Yahweh; So too, the disciples, on their trek to Jerusalem, to Jesus' crucifixion, enter days of despair and dysfunction and feel fickle and forgotten by God.

Yet, what these stories represent and what Peter refers to when he tells the church in today's epistle, "We did not repeat crafty myths when we told you about the powerful coming of our Lord Jesus Christ" but the real presence of God that makes fullness of life possible.

If we narrow the focus on these stories to identify what we are calling the transcendent moment when God's real presence appeared, we see Moses waiting for six days and the disciples prostrate. Then the exact moment of God's self-revelation and entrance in both stories comes *as a lone voice*.

What is significant but we easily pass by in these two accounts is that the presence of transcendent power is made with and hinges on spoken words.

God *calls* Moses and *announces* to the disciples. That is all. Yes, there are mountains and clouds and bright light; but as far as the Holy One of Israel goes, there is no other form, no stable or firm assurance.

God's self-giving comes *as a verbal command*, nothing more or less.

Which leaves just enough flexibility, in a story, for readers to allow for wonder and awe. What did the words sound like, were they physically audible? In a way it doesn't matter but it does obviate the argument against literal interpretation used to discount a real presence. What does matter is the response to the voice that summons.

Israel makes covenant with an utterly unheard of or seen before monotheistic God. And the disciples, after the resurrection, begin a movement that fulfills all of Mary's predictions for social justice.

Transcendent means "beyond the limits of possible experience" but the results of witnessing the transcendent God are everywhere visible.

In other words, what we have to go on is faith in action – the trust that what we find compelling in the prophecy of an Isaiah or Martin Luther King, Jr., what is moving in a Bach partita or the gravelly voice of Louis Armstrong (here on the eve of Mardi Gras) or a Rembrandt canvass or a Gerard Manley Hopkins poem or the extended hand of a church member to a stranger at Meet and Mingle. What compels us is the presence of a power bigger than any one of us in the moment itself, that summons us to be ‘better than ourselves,’ and to witness this compelling power.

For all of his remarkable, intricate, eloquent explication George Steiner is in the end quite circumspect. He says, much like St. Paul’s ‘if there is no resurrection of the dead then we are the most to be pitied,’ Steiner says, “such conjecture may, wherever it has been or is put forward may be wholly erroneous. If it is embarrassed, it will most certainly be so.”

The possibility of being wrong, pitied or embarrassed stops neither the great apostle nor the British critic. They themselves have been summoned, by a voice, a real presence, a transcendent moment.

Exodus and Matthew admonish us to listen. On this Transfiguration Sunday that is wise advice as we face the forty days of lent to come.

We listen for a lone voice, void of form or substance, but a voice nonetheless from beyond us; a voice and presence that conveys the radiant, transcendent truth of God’s presence in this the very same world we inhabit.

Who knows what these forty days of Lent will bring? There is unsettling in the land, wars threaten world peace, nor can the life and wellbeing of our schools and churches, our neighborhoods and families be taken for granted – especially now.

This weekend I am thinking about our son Ian, his wife Julie and their 20 month old daughter Eliza. They are spending the weekend in New Hampshire where Ian has vacationed all his life. I know what he will do today. He will ride his bike three miles up route 11 along Lake Winnepesaukee, that rises into the foothills of the Belknap mountains; he will then hike, or maybe run the 1.1 miles to the top of Mt. Major.

At the top he will look out over the big lake and its 300 islands and north to the White Mts. where, if it is a clear, he will see Mt. Washington, the highest peak east of the Mississippi. He will be silent and feel the breeze the raptors fly in and upon below the summit where he sits, the cool air will fill his lungs.

There he will sit and listen until he hears a voice that says, “All will be well, All manner of things shall be well.” Then he will descend the mountain and tomorrow re-enter his challenging job and busy life as a husband and father.

The transcendent power of God has entered the world. The real presence of God is at work in our relationships. The voice of God calls us, as it has called God’s people for millennia, to witness to the power of healing and justice at work in the world.

We listen for a voice here on this mountaintop of worship and praise today.

Then we follow where we are summoned, even in a dark time, to bring life and hope. Amen.