

Jeff Paschal

"Prequel" GPPC 2-23-20
Exodus, 24:12-18, Matthew 17:1-9

The Christian faith is built on the twin pillars of understanding *and* mystery, of grasping *and* being grasped by the One who is finally beyond what we can say and know.

In a sermon a few years ago, the late preaching professor Fred Craddock talked about going to the movies with his grandchildren and son-in-law. They'd gone to see *Star Wars, Episode 1, The Phantom Menace*. Craddock said, "I was determined to take them to see this, even though when I arrived, they said, 'We've seen this, but you have to see it lots of times.'

"I said, 'Okay.' I didn't want to be totally ignorant, so I inquired around before going, to find something about it, and I had the name Luke Skywalker. That's about all I had." They got to the theater packed with young folks. The movie began, and just a few minutes into it, people began to applaud. Craddock writes, "I asked the boys what the applause was for, and they said, 'Those two are Jedi.'

"I said, 'Well, of course . . . When is Luke Skywalker going to come in?'

"[A grandson answered] 'He hasn't been born yet.'

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“I said, ‘Well, I had that name, Luke Skywalker, and he was a good guy.’

“He said, ‘Well, episodes 4, 5, and 6 came out, and now we’re going to have 1, 2, and 3.’

“I said, ‘That’s why everybody in here knows so much.’

“He said, ‘Yeah. Everybody knows that. We have them at home if you want to look at them.’

“I said, ‘Well, thanks, um, I don’t think so.’ Later, I said, ‘That’s rather strange, having episode 1 after you’ve had 4, 5, and 6.’

“And he said, ‘Uh, Gramps, this is a prequel. A prequel. It’s before the others.’

“I said, ‘All right.’” (Fred B. Craddock, *Craddock Stories*, ed. Mike Graves and Richard F. Ward, 98-99.)

A prequel. Jesus takes Peter, James, and John (sort of his inner circle of disciples) up on a high mountain, maybe Mount Tabor. As one scholar says, “The *high* mountain symbolizes the border zone between earth and heaven, between the material and the spiritual.” (Douglas R.A. Hare, *Matthew*, The Interpretation Commentary Series, 198.) Of course, the scene is also reminiscent of Moses going up on Mount Sinai to receive the Ten Commandments from God. Jesus takes

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his inner group up on this high mountain, to a place set apart, a place where God might speak and be heard more clearly.

And then, says Matthew, all heaven breaks loose. Jesus is transfigured. His face shines like the sun and his clothes become dazzling white. What happened? Mystery happened. Nobody can say exactly what happened. We're limited by our human words and human descriptions.

But one scholar can at least say this much: "When Jesus' face begins to shine and his clothes become luminous, it is not because of some mutation in him; it is a disclosure of what already is true about him—a sign of his glory, an apocalyptic way of saying, 'Look! This Jesus of splendor is who he really is.' When Jesus is accompanied by Moses and Elijah, it is a pulling back of the curtains of time to show that Jesus is continuous with all that God has promised . . . in the Law and the Prophets; [and] when Jesus stands alone at the end of the story . . . [we see] the Law and the Prophets have been fulfilled and magnified in him." (Thomas G. Long, *Matthew*, The Westminster Bible Companion, 193.)

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When Jesus is transfigured and Moses and Elijah appear too, Peter (being the ever-practical disciple) suggests the church seize this opportunity and

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immediately launch a building campaign constructing three dwellings, apparently to capture this wondrous moment. But a bright cloud casts an odd shadow over the entire proceedings and plan. And a voice, the voice of God speaks from the cloud, “This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!” So, God says Jesus is not merely a wonder to behold; Jesus is Lord to be obeyed.

And as we might expect, the disciples are terrified and fall to the ground, overwhelmed by fear. But notice how Jesus responds to them. He doesn’t turn into “Drill Sergeant Jesus” and yell, “Get up, you babies!” No. Like a tender father or mother, Jesus comes, bends down, *touches* them and says, “Get up and do not be afraid.”

It’s as though Jesus understands that the direct voice of God is too much for us human beings. Without buffer, God’s voice overwhelms us. We cannot bear it. We need a mediator. We need the encouraging words and the touch of our Savior. “Get up and do not be afraid.” And so, they look up (maybe they’re still too scared to rise), they look up and see Jesus alone.

The Transfiguration is a prequel, an advance unveiling of Jesus’ true identity as the culmination of God’s promise. But I wonder why God does such

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a thing with Jesus.

Is God just showing off? “See how impressive Jesus is? How do you like them apples?” Maybe.

Or is God reminding the first Christians and us that Jesus is no mere mortal to be ignored if he is challenging or inconvenient to our plans or he might say something about our politics? “Wake up, church. Jesus is Lord, and you are not.” Maybe that’s it.

But here is another possibility. God knew all the turmoil and loss the first disciples would be facing. And God gave those first disciples an advance screening of the story’s ending, a sign that God’s story with us ends well. That makes sense to me.

And imagine our own lives filled with the swirling tides of gladness and grief. The happiness of college students coming home in a week or two. Joyful retirement and birthday parties. Relaxing vacations in warm places. The relentless return of spring as the fat robins hop around and sing and the flowers spring forth. So much to celebrate. But also we experience sorrow as friends and family members die, and the world is torn asunder by the rise of authoritarianism in many places and tyrants and would-be tyrants claw to keep

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their power and fight against freedom. Meanwhile, good health does not return.

Work is frustrating. Relationships are broken. Failure is public. Faith is tenuous. Our lives are a curious mixture of celebration and sorrow. And I wonder if God provides the Transfiguration as a way to strengthen us. And maybe God also sends us secondary transfigurations to help us along the way.

Douglas Burton-Christie teaches Christian Spirituality at Loyola Marymount University. He tells about a time in his young adulthood when he went on a weekend spiritual retreat with some young people who had an attractive and authentic faith. Burton-Christie had been reared as a Catholic, baptized, first communion, confirmation, a process similar for our Presbyterian young folks who are in the middle of it right now. But for some reason, the Christian faith had never seemed real to Burton-Christie. He says, “I had gone on this retreat as a kind of dare, to demonstrate to my friends that nothing they or anyone else could do would affect me, would lead me to open myself to God. I did not need God, at least not the God who they spoke about all the time.”

And at the end of the weekend, Burton-Christie had been successful; he'd withstood his friends and God. It was Sunday afternoon and the bus was

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taking them home. He writes, “I had survived the weekend. Nothing had changed. I had resisted all attempts to win me over to a life of faith. But I did not feel happy . . . Then something strange happened. I felt what I can only describe as a strong sensation of warmth coursing through my body. No conscious thought accompanied it.” A few minutes later the bus pulled over at a rest stop and Burton-Christie was one of the first people off the bus. He went and sat down against a wall and simply watched his friends getting off the bus. He says, “It was extraordinary. I found myself gazing at them, drinking in their faces. And I was aware of only one thing: their beauty. Each one of them appeared to be radiant, bathed in a kind of light . . . In that moment, I saw only their goodness, their beauty. They were transfigured.” And over the days and weeks afterwards, Burton-Christie continued to reflect upon and be shaped by that transfiguration. And little by little spiritual renewal grew in him. And he too came to a vibrant, joyous faith. (Douglas Burton-Christie, “The Birth of the Word in the Soul,” *Weavings*, Jan/Feb. 2008, 20-24.)

On Wednesday we begin the season of Lent, a time for reflection and repentance. And like those first disciples, the living Christ invites us to come away with Christ by ourselves in quiet. Maybe we’ll read Scripture and pray

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more or walk the prayer path near the oak tree while we pray. Some of us may go up on a high mountain to pray. Others may sit in silence in a coffee shop. Some may write in a journal. Or we may write to those who govern. Whatever we do, we do with hope, because we know how the story ends; God's promise to the universe is fulfilled in our tender, self-giving Lord. So, we pray and remain open to other transfigurations God might send dazzling our way. After all, we've seen the prequel, and we know how the story ends, and we need not be afraid. Through Christ our living and amazing Lord. Amen. ©Jeff Paschal