

February 7, 2016
TEXT: Luke 9:28–36
TITLE: Cloudy, Yet Bright

When Heather, Patrice, Mary Lynn and I graduated from seminary, we received a master's of divinity degree. So presumably we are masters at talking about divinity. Now I won't speak for my colleagues, but for me preaching is more pointing toward divinity than claiming to have all the answers about divinity. Divinity is hard to talk about because by definition it surpasses every other human experience. Like it says in Isaiah 55, *As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts, says the Lord.* We masters of divinity point to the wonder of creation and hope you'll glimpse the divine God in the miracle of life. We tell about the movements of God's Holy Spirit by which lives are transformed and hope you'll be receptive to letting that same divine Spirit move in your own life. But if those two categories of divinity fail to communicate as clearly as we hope, then we talk about Jesus, the One called Christ, the Son of God, this figure from world history whom we describe as fully human yet fully divine. I don't know if our sermons about divinity are always successful, but at least we try to talk honestly about what we feel in our souls. And we have scripture to help us, for in those words is a truth far greater than anything represented by the diplomas on our office walls.

Today's passage doesn't try to define divinity as much as it invites us to step into what we sometimes call a "thin place of faith"—a place where God's divine reality and our earthly reality come close enough together to almost touch. It happens on a mountaintop, which is appropriate since that's a place where earth and sky come together. Three disciples witness what happens. In fact, we are like those disciples—Peter, John, and James. We too glimpse something in Jesus, some aspect of his divine nature that we recognize as real and yet struggle to comprehend.

The gospel writer does a great job of capturing the sense of "faithful confusion" that pervaded the "thin place" of Jesus' transfiguration. He describes that while the disciples are on the mountain with Jesus, they were sleepy and yet they managed to stay awake. They saw Jesus with Moses and Elijah, and yet only when these guests prepared to leave did they try to build them a shelter to stay in. And although Jesus' clothes shone a dazzling white, a cloud came down to obscure the bright sight of it all. Sleepy yet awake; people leaving yet asked to stay; bright garments yet feeling overwhelmed, literally within a cloud. This whole story is rich with symbolism: it happens up on a mountain top, just like the one Moses climbed to receive the Ten Commandments; there are white garments as a symbol of divine status; and God's voice speaks from a cloud, just like what happened when Jesus was baptized. These details are meant to pull us into this "thin place of faith" so that we will accept for a moment that something holy and wonderful and divine is a part of this world and has come to us that we might be saved and made whole at last.

Let me share an example from recent history that captures a quality of the paradox, wonder and confusion described for us in the Transfiguration story. If you sometimes have trouble remembering what day it is, be thankful you didn't live in America in 1752. Ever since the days of Julius Caesar the world has used a Julian calendar—365 days in a year with an extra day in February every leap year. But in the 9th century, the Western world decided that the New Year began on March 25th, the traditional date for the angel's annunciation to Mary that she would give birth to the Christ child nine months later. So for centuries, New Year's Eve was celebrated on March 24th. However, there was a twofold problem. The Julian calendar had overcompensated and added one too many days in the year every 128 years. So by the 16th century, the entire calendar was 11 days off. Pope Gregory XIII decided something had to be done, so a new calendar was established—one that jumped ahead 11 days so that the lunar equinox cycles and the calendar cycles were back in sync. However, Pope Gregory also decided that instead of March 25th being the beginning of the new year, January 1st should be New Year's Day. Therefore, in 1582 the new calendar was accepted in Europe, but England and later its American colonies would not accept this new calendar for another 170 years. Colonial Americans lived with two calendars for decades until finally the change was made so that when you went to bed in Pennsylvania on December 31, 1751, for the first time in your life the next day was a new year—now 1752. And when you went to bed on September 2, 1752 and woke up the next morning, it would now be September 14, 1752.

Did you follow all that? Imagine trying to get these changes into your head: New Years shifting back 3 months, and then the whole calendar leaping forward by 11 days in September. You can understand the concepts, yet it still feels confusing. The details are bright and crystal clear, but the whole thing also seems cloudy and disorienting. This is similar to what Peter, John and James experienced at the Transfiguration. They saw the Jesus they knew so well and yet here were Moses and Elijah, here were dazzling clothes, here was a heavenly voice naming Jesus the Son of God to whom we should listen, and then suddenly there was only Jesus again alone with them on that mountaintop. All of it was too much to be understood. Yet it was designed not to be grasped and analyzed, but simply to be pondered and marveled at and trusted.

My seminary diploma may say "Master of Divinity," but in truth we all share a different title. In the words of preacher Barbara Brown Taylor, we are "detectives of divinity." As she put it, our spiritual assignment is to collect evidence of God's presence in our world—to allow our eyes occasionally to be blinded by heavenly glare that dazzles, to allow our hearts to be strangely warmed and moved by a spiritual passion and hope that defies logic, and to allow our spirits to be disoriented yet energized by encountering Christ's divinity in the "thin places of our lives."¹ Don't ask me to pinpoint where and how this will occur. Simply stop and say to yourself: "OK—Divinity is real. God in Christ through the Holy Spirit is near to me. So Lord, lead me to your thin places of faith."

My job as a preacher is not to explain things to you. My job is to stand beside you as together we encounter a holy mystery—one that is beside us and beyond us, human-directed yet divine-grounded, active and eternal and ultimate in every sense of those words. In a few moments, we are going to share another mystery—not on a mountaintop with bright garments and voices speaking from clouds, but rather one around a table. Bread will be blessed and broken and shared. A cup will be poured out and given to ease your thirst. Built into the entire communion sacrament are the unavoidable paradoxes of our faith: Jesus, human and divine, will be both present and absent at this meal, in which his suffering and glory are remembered, and his death and resurrection are proclaimed.

What are you to do with this? You can reject it all. Many have chosen that path. You can pick and choose what you want from these faith stories. Many more have selected that option. Or you can be honest about who you are—a sleepy Presbyterian, somewhat awake in this world, someone who has been on mountaintops and dark valleys, someone who has felt a stirring in your spirit that says that there is more to life than just flesh and fate, someone who has touched the boundaries of “thin places” and allowed the wonder of spiritual mysteries to enfold you—and someone who, for today at least, is willing to listen for that voice from heaven and to share in a meal that is much more than a meal.

You are invited to take a step of faith today. That’s all—one step forward, to see something, to build something, to hear something. Accept the wonder of divinity and the glory revealed on that mountain long ago: God in Christ has always been, is now and will always be for you and all humanity. That’s not something you have to understand in your head; you simply allow yourself to trust it with your heart and then follow where Christ leads.

AMEN

¹ Barbara Brown Taylor, The Preaching Life, pp. 15-16.