
Visions and Voices

A sermon by the Rev. Julia Mitchener The Last Sunday after the Epiphany – Year B

Well, I had another one of those COVID dreams the other night. Unlike most that I've experienced during the pandemic, this one involved the virus itself—or, rather, it involved the vaccine. I was about to receive my first shot (In reality, this isn't likely to happen for quite some time, but, in my dream, it seemed imminent). A nurse handed me a clipboard with a waiver to sign. I heard the crinkle of a syringe packet being opened and saw a vial of liquid getting shaken. I smelled the scent of rubbing alcohol and felt a cold, damp bit of cotton sweep across my upper arm. I looked away so I wouldn't tense up watching the needle go in. "Just a little pinch," the nurse reassured me. And then . . . and then I woke up. I woke up blinking and confused, simultaneously hopeful and deflated. Was this real, or had it all just been a dream? I honestly wasn't sure for a few seconds, because when I looked down at my left arm—no kidding—I found my pajama sleeve pushed all the way to my shoulder. I had rolled it up in my sleep!

We are living in strange and disorienting times—times when it can be hard to know what is real and what is not, what is actually possible and what is merely wishful thinking. Whether it's bizarre and vivid dreams that wake us up in a sweat, or confusion about what day of the week it is, or debates over how to protect people's physical health without also destroying their mental well being, or predictions about when this whole horror show is finally going to end, there is so much that is still murky, so much that remains unclear even eleven months into the coronavirus pandemic.

Which is why, to be perfectly honest, I didn't really want to preach today. Not on this particular gospel lesson we just heard—not now, not this year. After all, this is a story—this story of the Transfiguration—this is a story about people who apparently can see the way ahead, who can see it clearly, more clearly, all of a sudden, than they have ever seen it before. Three of Jesus' disciples—Peter, James, and John—head up a mountain and experience this spectacular vision that suddenly seems to set everything straight. The disciples have been wondering about Jesus, quite frankly—wondering about who he really is and wondering about themselves, too, about who they really are and whether they have what it takes to go the distance with him. But then they climb up that mountain with Jesus and see his clothes gleaming like they've been washed on the heavy duty cycle three times; Moses and Elijah appear and offer their long awaited endorsements and suddenly it's like, *Shazaam!* All the stuff the disciples have been puzzling over, lying awake at night trying to figure out how the pieces might fit together—suddenly it all makes sense.

The disciples' experience is so powerful and magnificent, so hopeful and uplifting, that they are reluctant to let it go. *Let's pitch some tents and stay up here on this mountain forever, enjoying the view,* Peter suggests. The disciples are reluctant to let this experience go. Which can make the story tough to hear right now, at least it can for me. I don't know about you, but I haven't really had any mountaintop experiences lately—none to hold onto and none to let go of either. I am not seeing visions, other than the ones in my bizarre dreams. As for my hope, well, in the words of writer Anne Lamott, "My hope is out in the parking lot doing pushups." Which feels like something entirely different than what's happening with the disciples on the Mount of Transfiguration.

Except, that is, for what happens next. Except for what happens next. You see, in this morning's gospel, after the disciples have their glorious vision, the fog rolls in. Mountains are funny like that, aren't they? The fog rolls in. It rolls in in the form of a great cloud. Suddenly no one can see a thing. Peter, James, and John, we learn, are terrified. They are terrified. A more literal English translation of the Greek word here might read, "They are clueless." They are clueless. That's right—clueless. Just like us.

The disciples are confused, clueless, they're flummoxed—and this is precisely the moment in which God speaks to them! This is precisely when God reveals God's self to them most powerfully. Not while the disciples

are still sitting around basking in the afterglow of their great vision making plans to pitch tents and roast s'mores, but when it's become obvious they're about to stumble, about to make a misstep, about to veer off in the wrong direction. God speaks, not out of a bright cerulean sky with 10 miles' visibility, but out of a dense, low lying cloud. God speaks. God speaks words of reassurance and guidance. And the disciples, clueless though they may be, somehow manage to hear. How? Who knows? Maybe their hearing is related to their confusion; maybe they hear better somehow now that they can't see—you know, compensation and all that. But it doesn't really matter. What matters is that God speaks. God speaks in words that are unmistakable: "This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!" Listen to him.

Well, do you get what is the hopeful piece in all of this for you and me? Do you hear the Good News? It's that out of the thick pea soup of the disciples' fear and confusion, God still speaks clearly and definitively, God gives the disciples guidance to set them on the right path. Even in those times when they can't see well enough to take the next step, God, in Jesus, goes before them. This is actually one of the great themes of Mark's Gospel, that Jesus is preceding us into all those places we are so afraid to go. Places where we feel lost and confused, places where we worry that one false step might send us off a cliff. Places where the fog is so thick we can't see five feet in front of our face. "Go to Galilee," an angel will tell Jesus' first disciples (and us, too), at Easter. Don't dilly-dally, lingering in places that need no longer hold you. Instead, go to Galilee. There, you will see him, for he has gone ahead of you. So go. Go.

Before you go, though, take a moment to listen. Listen for the voice of Jesus. Even when you're pretty sure you won't hear anything. Even when the words come in whispers so soft you wonder if they were just a dream. Listen.

I wonder what words Jesus might be whispering to us today? In the midst of all the confusion, terror, sadness and frustration of this present time, in the midst of the loud cacophony of so many other voices clamoring for audience, I wonder what words Jesus might be speaking?

Maybe something like this:

Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom.

In the world you will have tribulation, but be of good cheer, for I have overcome the world.

Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?

The child is not dead but is sleeping.

Peace, be still.

I am the way, the truth, and the life.

In my Father's house, there are many rooms; if that were not so, would I have told you that I am going there to prepare a place for you?

And lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world.

Amen.