

“To Believe In Someone”

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Transfiguration Sunday

2 Peter 1:16-21

Matt. 17:1-9

*‘When we told you about the power and the return of our Lord Jesus Christ,
we were not telling clever stories that someone had made up.*

But with our own eyes we saw his true greatness.’ 2 Peter 1:16

Let us pray... O God,

Help us to believe despite times of our unbelief.

Help us to see the humanity of others and to be more human ourselves.

Amen

Who do you believe in?

What does it mean to ‘believe in somebody’?

I’m afraid that 9 times out of 10, people will let you down and
not because people are inherently unreliable – or even ‘sinners’,
and not because it’s just ‘human’ to do that.

A friend once told me she thought very few people are malicious,
and that most people are just careless.

I would add that each of us simply has our own priorities and situations change
such that life is not perfect and we are not perfect.

There was a time when I felt that in general,
you can’t count on anybody... completely, but you have to trust sometime
and you can build on trust.

I find that – generally, people want to be helpful,
but you got to help them help you.

There’s all kinds of red tape in life and it can get pretty frustrating,
especially, when dealing with any kind of bureaucracy – churches included.

You got to have your work orders filled out correctly,
your requests in duplicate, and copies of your receipts.

If you can, though, you try to put a human face on your situation
so that the other person – whether that is a clerk or a nurse or a mechanic,
will want to work with you and include you in their priorities.

As they get to know you and co-operate with you over time,
a relationship of trust is established, and once that is in place,
you can build on it, no matter what level of trust you start from.

However, we don’t always have the luxury of time to establish
a relationship of trust – you are simply at the mercy of events.

Who do you believe in, then? What does it mean to believe in somebody?

Willard, p.2

The Apostle Peter is portrayed in the Gospels as initially impulsive and faltering, yet who becomes dauntless at last in bringing the Good News of Jesus Christ into the wider world.

In today's lesson from the second epistle attributed to Peter, the theophany on the mountaintop of Transfiguration is recalled – in which God affirms Jesus as God's beloved Son, and that the disciples are to listen to him.

Peter reminds his listeners that he was there to see and hear this happen.

What preceded this event, was a question Jesus put to his disciples while walking along a road not long after the death of John the Baptist, when he asked them,

“Who do people say that I am? Who do *you* say that I am?”

Peter answered saying,

“You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.”

Jesus praised Peter, but then tells them all what lies ahead for *him* – that he must go to Jerusalem where he will suffer and die, but on the third day rise.

Peter tries to stop him from talking like that,

but Jesus angrily rebukes him as an enemy to what he was trying to do.

For Peter as well as the rest of the disciples,

believing and trusting Jesus did not come easy.

Would the disciples get it? Would he have to go through suffering and death, only to have his disciples fail to understand and drift away in confusion?

That is why the story of the Transfiguration is in the middle of Matthew's Gospel – to provide the disciples with a dramatic memory of Jesus' true identity as turning point for his destiny in Jerusalem.

We are told that Moses and Elijah were present, talking with Jesus,

as if to show that Jesus is the bridge from the Law and the Prophets of old to a future that is unfolding.

Jesus wants his disciples to remember this experience

when they will be caught up in events that will even make them question whether there is a God at all.

We are told by the Gospel accounts that what happened

on the mountain of Transfiguration was visible and audible – light and dark, image and sound, overwhelming the disciples with terror, dropping them face down to the ground.

Then, Jesus reaches down to touch each of them, and get them to stand up...

Did the disciples believe in, Jesus? What does it mean to believe in him?

Willard, p.3

In Walter Wink's spiritual biography, Just Jesus, he describes some insights he learned from the first chapter of Ezekiel, in which the Prophet Ezekiel received a vision that bears some resemblance to the Transfiguration.

From 1:26-2:1, the Prophet Ezekiel said,

[1:26] And above the firmament over [the] heads [of the living creatures] there was the likeness of a throne, in appearance like sapphire; and seated above the likeness of a throne was a likeness as it were of a human form.

[27] And upward from what had the appearance of his loins I saw as it were gleaming bronze, like the appearance of fire enclosed round about; and downward from what had the appearance of his loins I saw as it were the appearance of fire, and there was brightness round about him.

[28] Like the appearance of the bow that is in the cloud on the day of rain, so was the appearance of the brightness round about.

Such was the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the LORD.

And when I saw it, I fell upon my face, and I heard the voice of one speaking.

[2:1] And he said to me,

"Son of man, stand upon your feet, and I will speak with you."

Living creatures, fiery light surrounding a human form, the prophet-disciple bowing down, made to stand up to face the glory of God. Ezekiel uses a lot of phrases such as 'the likeness of...' and 'the appearance of...' to avoid actually saying what or who he is looking at.

But Walter Wink puts together a startling conclusion, saying that what this vision means is that 'God is HUMAN' – in capital letters, and that... 'it is the great error of humanity to believe that it is human.

We are fragmentarily human, fleetingly human, brokenly human.

We see glimpses of our humanness, we can dream of what a more human existence and political order would be like,

but we have not yet arrived at true humanness.

Only God is human, and we are made in God's image and likeness – which is to say, we are capable of becoming human.'

Dr. Wink goes on to say,

'The goal of life, then, is not to become something we are not – divine – but to become what we truly are – human.'

Willard, p.4

Just as the disciples were awestruck, with their faces down,
so was Ezekiel, knocked down to the ground.

Then, Walter Wink observes:

‘...the God who has struck him down now orders him to his feet...

God will not speak [to him] as to an inferior,
[God] will not tolerate a servile mentality.

The Spirit enters Ezekiel to embolden him to face this awesome vision.’

In his reflections about Ezekiel’s encounter with God,

Walter Wink came to this realization, saying...

‘I now know more about God, thanks to Jesus, than I do about myself.’

This is not to say that God physically walks around on two legs

if not sitting on a throne in Heaven – Ezekiel specifically avoids saying that,

but that true humanity is part of God’s divinity

and that we become more like God as we become more ourselves

as true human beings – just like Jesus.

Seems like a lot to think about for Sunday morning.

What I love about Walter Wink is that he demonstrated how the teachings
of our religion can work in the world as practical realities;

But he also takes into account the spiritual realities
of the great mystery and glory of God with us through Christ.

Another resource for you – another religious writer I trust,

to provide some more bread for your Lenten journey,

is a reading from that excellent devotional resource,

Jesus Calling, by Sarah Young for February 28th which reads...

‘Don’t look for affirmation in the wrong places:

your own evaluations, or those of other people.

The only real affirmation is My unconditional Love...’

God said to Jesus at his baptism, to affirm him,

“You are my beloved Son in whom I delight!”

And God said to Peter, James, and John on the Mount of Transfiguration,

“This is my beloved Son. Listen to him!”

Who do you believe in, then?

Believe in the humanity of God – the love that is possible in each of us

with Jesus Christ as our example.

What does it mean to believe in somebody?

Believe that to err is to be like any person, but to be truly human is divine.

Amen

*Our first lesson today is from 2 Peter 1:16-21,
in which the Apostle Peter specifically refers to the events
of the Transfiguration, telling us in our time, to listen to him, too...*

¹⁶ When we told you about the power and the return of our Lord Jesus Christ,
we were not telling clever stories that someone had made up.

But with our own eyes we saw his true greatness.

¹⁷ God, our great and wonderful Father, truly honored him by saying,
“This is my own dear Son, and I am pleased with him.”

¹⁸ We were there with Jesus on the holy mountain
and heard this voice speak from heaven.

¹⁹ All of this makes us even more certain that what the prophets said is true.

So you should pay close attention to their message,
as you would to a lamp shining in some dark place.

You must keep on paying attention until daylight comes
and the morning star rises in your hearts.

²⁰ But you need to realize that no one alone can understand
any of the prophecies in the Scriptures.

²¹ The prophets did not think these things up on their own,
but they were guided by the Spirit of God.

Let us be guided and challenged by these words.

Matthew 17:1-9

- [1] And after six days Jesus took with him Peter and James and John his brother,
and led them up a high mountain apart.
- [2] And he was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun,
and his garments became white as light.
- [3] And behold, there appeared to them Moses and Eli'jah,
talking with him.
- [4] And Peter said to Jesus,
"Lord, it is well that we are here; if you wish, I will make three booths here,
one for you and one for Moses and one for Eli'jah."
- [5] He was still speaking, when lo, a bright cloud overshadowed them,
and a voice from the cloud said,
"This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased; listen to him."
- [6] When the disciples heard this, they fell on their faces, and were filled with awe.
[7] But Jesus came and touched them, saying,
"Rise, and have no fear."
- [8] And when they lifted up their eyes,
they saw no one but Jesus only.
- [9] And as they were coming down the mountain, Jesus commanded them,
"Tell no one the vision, until the Son of man is raised from the dead."