



## Round Hill Community Church

---

### Sermon: February 14, 2010

---

**An Intimate Awe,** Robert B. Culp

Exodus 34:29-35; Luke 9:28-36

There are some experiences in life that require no commentary at all ... some experiences to which the only appropriate response on our part is silence. For me, being by Kathy's side at the births of each of our three girls; accompanying loved ones as they breathed their last to be received into God's loving arms; experiencing the majestic music of our own choir and the piano mastery of Chris; simply gazing into the heavens on a dark night seeing the moonlight glistening across newly-fallen snow ... all these have caused a hushed stillness to fall upon me and an insistent need to experience such beauty – **in silence**.

Poetry can engender such silence as well, for poetry forces us to slow down, stop skimming, and listen to each word closely, even reverently. Recently, I finished a book entitled *Twenty Poems to Nourish Your Soul*, written by Judith Valente and Charles Reynard, married to each other – she a former staff writer for the Wall Street Journal and now a broadcast journalist with PBS, and he a circuit court judge in Illinois ... and both of them poets.

For those who may find poetry intimidating – and many people do, Valente says, with reports such as “We had to read T.S. Eliot's ‘The Wasteland’ in freshman English and found it so difficult, we haven't read a poem since” – this book is wonderfully accessible and deeply spiritual, a great resource for re-discovering the sacred in our daily lives, and recommended reading for the Lenten season that begins with our Ash Wednesday Service and Dinner this week.

One of the poems in the book is “Star Turn,” by Charles Wright:

*Nothing is quite as secretive as the way the stars  
Take off their bandages and stare out  
At the night,  
that dark rehearsal hall,  
And whisper their little songs,  
The alpha and beta ones, the ones from the great fire.*

In her commentary, Valente writes, “Every one of us is a mystic. We may or may not realize it. We may not even like it. But whether we know it or not, whether we accept it or not, mystical experience is always there, inviting us on a journey of ultimate discovery.” As she writes about her commitment to star-gazing regularly, to look upon the constellations and meteor showers, she reflects, “Each time, I feel myself tapped on the shoulder, as if by a rod through which the supernatural flows. Each time I sense a true connection between my small self and that expansive light-filled mystery that makes us dream of God.”

One time something mystical happened to three friends of Jesus – Peter, James, and John – that left them speechless, something they couldn’t even begin to explain, much less understand. It was something so unusual, so unlikely, so mysterious, that they didn’t even attempt to speak about it.

The incident Luke describes is known as the transfiguration. Jesus took the three of them up a mountain to pray, which is a biblical signal, by the way, that something important is about to happen. Think of Moses on Mount Sinai where God gives him the commandments, or the sermon Jesus delivers “on the mount,” or the Mount of Olives where Jesus prays in anguish to his Abba Father. The way they remembered it a few decades later, when they finally broke their silence, Jesus’ clothes seemed to shine. Moses and Elijah appeared, and they talked about how Jesus’ life would end.

The disciples had fallen asleep, and they awoke in the middle of that strange and dazzling experience, and then Peter starts talking. In essence he says, “My, O my! This is fantastic! It’s so good that we’re here to see this. Think about what we might have missed, but we didn’t! We’re here together, and it’s so good. Okay, so let’s build! Let’s construct three dwellings here to preserve the moment, to remember the experience. Maybe we could come back here every year on the anniversary for a special service.” Luke who is telling this story is a little embarrassed by Peter’s chattering and apologizes for him: “He blurted this out without thinking, not knowing what he was saying.”

While Peter is going on and on about this building project, a cloud descends (another biblical signal that God is about to do or say something), and it overshadows them. Now, they’re terrified, and the voice says, “Be quiet. Stop talking. Listen. Listen to him. He is my Son, my Chosen.” And that’s the day when they started to learn to do that, to stop talking and to start listening, I mean, really listening to Jesus. And then the mountaintop experience was all over.

Luke concludes, “They kept silent and in those days told no one of the things they had seen.”

Indeed, there are some experiences in life that require no commentary, and invite us to the only appropriate response, which is to become silent. But Peter, good old Peter ... you have

to love him! He tries to reduce this experience to something he can get his mind around, understand, talk about, explain. He does what he is used to doing to make this experience on the mountain somehow fit into his worldview. And we pretty much do the same thing.

William Placher, a Presbyterian theologian, penned a book some years ago called *The Domestication of Transcendence: How Modern Thinking about God Went Wrong*. Placher points out that ever since the Enlightenment, Western thinking has depended upon reason as its ultimate criterion. Truth can be observed, analyzed, weighed, measured, explained, and understood. Mostly, that's a good thing ... for it's the basis for scientific method, which in turn is one of the foundations of our modern worldview.

But if reason is the only criterion, then that which is not explainable is seen to be not real. And that's what Placher means by the "domestication of transcendence." Rather than the holy, other, transcendent God of the Bible (the *mysterium tremendum*), we reduce God to ideas, concepts we can get our mind around; or we talk about God in terms that are trivial, simplistic, and altogether too comfortable. "The Man Upstairs" comes to mind, the God who helps us to sell our condo or find a good parking space on snowy mornings, or assists in the winning of the Super Bowl. Placher writes, "When the culturally dominant pictures of God have come to be simplistic, it becomes hard to arouse much excitement about the news of divine incarnation."

You see, to believe in God is to acknowledge that there is more to reality than we can explain, see, observe ... more than we can ever possibly understand. To believe in God is to acknowledge humbly that we do not know everything. To believe in God, the Lutheran Joseph Sittler used to teach, is an act of "intellectual modesty." It is to confess that there is a lot that we do not understand. Sometimes our religion itself forgets that. Sometimes the confidence with which religion speaks about God and God's will, God's position on this or that complex issue, God's political preferences, even God's chosen candidate ... is breathtaking.

Wouldn't it be refreshing when it comes to the big questions of life – such as the final destiny of all of us – if the response could be a little less certain, a little less absolute about who gets in and who does not, a little less exclusive and a lot more gracious? Wouldn't it be refreshing – in the face of suffering and painful tragedies – to have a televangelist humbly say, "We don't know the final answers. There's a mystery here that is beyond our capacity to comprehend. What we do know ... indeed, what we trust ... is that God is merciful and just and kind, and that God's love is unconditional."? Wouldn't it be refreshing to move beyond our smug sophistication cloaked in the busied fevers of life, and simply be still and keep silence in a posture of genuine and receptive humility?

I think part of what this story from Luke suggests is that we need to go to the mountain-top now and then. We need some downtime, some empty space, some silence ... for the sake of our spirits, not to mention our health and sanity. We need to get away and above it all for a

while ... to see things from a distance, where they look smaller and more manageable, to go as high as you can by your own power and then to sit down, while a couple of red-tailed hawks go higher still.

Indeed, we need a time and a place where nothing is happening, where nothing is being said, and where in the hushed stillness we sense a “thin place” or a “cracked door” between this world and some other, brighter place where God is no absentee landlord, but a very real and palpable presence. Even more, though, we should not be too quick to come down from the mountain, but we should stay there for a while – in the wondrous, mysterious, awe-filled silence.

That’s what the three disciples did, even weighed down by their sleepiness and the heaviness of what Jesus had been teaching them about the costs of discipleship and what was awaiting him in Jerusalem. Removed from the hectic rush of life and human need in the valley below, Jesus leads them into the sacred narrative of their faith, where they are reminded of their ancestors in the faith, Moses and Elijah, who persevered in faith in spite of the obstacles that came their way. They are admonished to listen to Jesus as God’s Son, and to draw strength from the shared memory of God’s abiding and liberating presence in their lives.

But they also catch a glimpse of the shining face of God. There on the mountaintop, in the pure clear light at the mountain’s peak, in that thin place of intimate awe, their eyes are opened to see and experience the sacred light.

Such light that radiates from Jesus’ face is not meant to dazzle or overwhelm, but to empower and set free. Indeed, it helps those first disciples to put in perspective Jesus’ teaching about carrying one’s cross, suffering, and death. It is meant to light the way of their journey with him to the cross and beyond.

Afterwards, though, Jesus and his disciples do come down from the mountain. Instead of building those three dwellings, they descend to the valley below and are met by a great crowd. And out of the crowd comes a shout, a desperate plea for help from a frantic father whose son is convulsing and very sick, broken and blocked off from the goodness of life.

Think of the rhythm of that – from the mystical cloud on the mountain, the experience of God’s holy transcendence ... down to this – to a crowd, a frantic father, a desperately sick boy lying in the dirt, convulsing. There is something in that rhythm of the very heart of Christianity: the mysterious holiness of the mountain and the blunt reality of human life and human need and human suffering.

You see, there on the top of the mountain we come to understand what our faith and the church are all about: to bring us into the awesome presence of God, to remind us that we live our lives in the presence of God, to point to the sacred, the holy, the godly in everyday life. And

then to lead us, in the name of God, into the crowd, the city, the valley of human need where little children are sick and frantic parents cry out for help.

Both/And ... not either/or. Both worship and service; both glorious music and times of silent meditation; both the quiet intimacy of our prayers on a Sunday morning and the noisy chaos of feeding the hungry and homeless at Pacific House or St Luke's.

There is truth up there in the mystical silence on the mountain, and there is truth in the coming down from the mountain to the valley. There is purpose and challenge and mission. And there is the wondrous mystery of that man Jesus, teaching, healing, loving, making his way to the cross for you and me. "And they kept silent and in those days told no one any of the things they had seen."

Let us pray: O Lord our God, we yearn to experience something of the mystical within our lives today, and to come to know something of your wondrous and personal love in those thin places of the spirit where your nearness and light break through into our lives. And we yearn, too, to know you where cross the crowded ways of life ... amidst human triumph and struggle, joy and sorrow, laughter and tears ... where you have promised to be ever near us as our companion, and friend, and Lord. Attend our yearnings graciously on mountaintops and in valleys, through Jesus Christ. Amen.