

St. Paul's, August 5, 2007

The Feast of the Transfiguration of our Lord.

Daniel 7:1-18, Psalm 99, 2 Peter 1:10-19, Luke 9:23-36.

“Oh, I never knew”

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It's difficult for us as modern people, people who have been given so much knowledge about the workings of the physical world, to accept and understand the idea of prophetic visions, or theophanies. We have come to rely on a degree of certainty about how things work, that they will behave predictably. The sun will rise every morning and go down every night, a rock dropped from the roof will fall to the ground...that sort of thing. It would be disconcerting to say the least, if the sun did not come up, or if that rock just hovered there. We also expect that the people we have come to know will behave more or less consistently from day to day and we become uncomfortable and worry when their behavior, or appearance, changes. In short we have a sense of how things are and should be and we like it that way thank you very much.

I recently saw a short video called “Dr. Quantum visits Flatland.” It's a wonderful little cartoon where Dr. Quantum, a cartoon science professor, visits a world that has only two dimensions. There is only forward and backward, left and right but no up or down. In Flatland he speaks to Dottie, one of its flat circular inhabitants. He speaks to her from “above”, a dimension wholly unknown to the flatlanders, to whom even speaking the A-word was forbidden, and she is terrified. She refuses to believe her own ears and hides in one of her rooms. Of course the room has no ceiling because ceilings are above, and Dr. Quantum can see her plain as day. He then tells her all of the things he sees in her other rooms, especially inside her hidden safe, which of course has no top. She is frightened and amazed but reluctantly speaks and asks if he is a god. Dr. Quantum then explains that he can see things in a way the she cannot yet see them, in three dimensions. She is awe-struck, and when Dr. Quantum asks her if she is ready to experience the other dimensions she asks, “What will happen, what will I become,” she says. He says, “You will have to become it to know.” She agrees and

he gently lifts her off the plane of Flatland. Released from her two dimensional reality she sees Dr. Quantum and then sees her whole world from “above,” in a way that no Flatlander had ever seen it before, a way that no Flatlander could even have conceived of. She whispers, “Oh, I never knew!” Her whole world was transformed in that moment. All that she thought predictable and constant; as the way things had been and always would be, had been changed forever. For her that rock just hovered there.

Peter, John and James, went up onto the mountain with Jesus to pray. “And while he was praying the appearance of his face changed, and his clothes became dazzling white. Suddenly they saw two men, Moses and Elijah, talking to him.” Luke is trying to describe for us a moment where those things that are known and predictable for us and for Jesus’ disciples were forever changed. They go up on the mountain because the mountain is a Holy place, a place where God revealed Godself and has spoken to the prophets in times past and now Jesus invites them to accompany him while he prays to God, to be witnesses to his communion with God. Like us, Peter and his companions are Flatlanders. Although they have traveled with Jesus as his disciples, they’ve heard his parables, they’ve seen his miraculous healings, they cannot yet see as he sees, they are still stuck in the limited dimensions of our familiar world. Luke is trying to explain this profound moment of revelation to which the disciples have been invited. He does this by drawing on those things that carried meaning for his readers. Like Moses’ face after speaking with God, Jesus’ face is changes for them. The Greek word Luke uses is “hetero”, or other, Jesus face has become other for them. They begin to see him in a different way. In Mark’s Gospel the word is “metamorphosis”, or transformation from one form to another. It is no longer the familiar face of their teacher; it has been wholly transformed. His clothes become a dazzling white, the color of purity and perfection, the color of one who has been in the presence of God. Jesus is being transfigured before their eyes. Like Dottie in the Dr. Quantum story they are slowly being peeled off the Flatland plane. Luke writes that Moses and Elijah appear with Jesus. This puts him in the company of the great prophets of Israel, prophets that did not die but were taken up to heaven. At this point the disciples who had been “weighed down

with sleep,” who have been stuck in their familiar predictable world but have managed to stay just awake enough to be open to this vision, begin to see. Peter says to Jesus, “Master it is good for us to be here.” It’s a wonderful understatement. It reveals that Peter has begun to see that his teacher is not just a teacher but that there is something much more momentous and transforming going on here. He cannot yet grasp the enormity of the moment but enough has been revealed that he wants to hold on to the moment. He blurts out, “let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.” Having seen the edges of this revelation Peter wants to capture it and stay in that moment, he wants to freeze that moment of revelation so that they can dwell in it and begin to understand it, to make it part of their more familiar and predictable world. But this is not to be, the revelation is not yet complete. “A cloud came and overshadowed them; and they were terrified as they entered the cloud. Peter thought that he had begun to understand the vision they were being shown, he and his companions had begun to understand that their teacher was at least as great as the ancient prophets. This apparent understanding is shattered in the next moment. “Then from the cloud came a voice that said, this is my Son, my Chosen, listen to him!”

Luke says, that after the voice spoke, Jesus was found alone, the moment of revelation was over and the disciples told no one about their vision. We would have expected a different end to this story wouldn’t we? We would have expected that like Dottie the Flatlander, finally released from her two-dimensional reality, the disciples would have stood in awestruck silence, reveling in their transfigured view of reality and whispered, “Oh, I never knew.” But they don’t. They are not willing or not able to allow themselves to be peeled off the surface of Flatland. They are not willing or not able to enter fully into the reality of the incarnate Christ there with them, to be liberated from their known and predictable reality and truly see. But let’s not be too hard on the poor disciples, they are after all only mirrors of ourselves. It is difficult to let go of all that is comfortable and familiar and to allow ourselves to be open to a disruption of reality where all we can do is exclaim, “Oh, I never knew.”

Luke's telling of the Transfiguration story is meant to disrupt our understanding of how the world is. It is meant to convey to us that the unknowable and timeless God came to dwell among us for a time so that we might "listen to him" and thereby come to what God wants of and for us. It is meant to change us forever. An awestruck, "Oh, I never knew," seems a wholly appropriate response. Amen.