

## WHAT DO YOU SAY?

Sermon Preached by Jon M. Walton

February 3, 2008

Scripture: Exodus 24:12-18; Matthew 17:1-9

We are barely over Christmas, looking the Super Bowl right down the barrel tonight, and Wednesday starts Lent, the absolute earliest day on which Ash Wednesday can occur. That means Easter is on its way, ready or not, and Easter will be as early on the calendar as it can be as well. I remember one Easter Sunday as a seminarian, when I served as an intern at West Park Presbyterian Church here in the city, and it snowed that Easter morning. Picture it: snow falling on Easter bonnets. There's no ruling that out this year.

So having just celebrated one big event in the Christian calendar (Christmas), here we are lining up to celebrate the other in just seven weeks (Easter). But first comes Lent, and before that comes the story of the Transfiguration today.

Now most of us have no idea what to make of the Transfiguration, whether it is crucial or expendable to faith. On a metaphorical level, it's not so hard to unpack. The three closest disciples, Peter, James and John go with Jesus up to a high mountain, where from a religious perspective important things often happen. On this particular occasion three of the inner circle of disciples see the glory of God revealed in Jesus, God's radiant power and majesty shining through him.

It is a scene reminiscent of the other lesson read today when Moses encountered God on Mt. Sinai, a story from the book of Exodus. There, on Sinai, a thick cloud settled in and lingered as Moses and Joshua waited for the Lord. For six days they waited and kept silence, until finally God called Moses and came to him out of the cloud like a devouring fire.

For the next eight chapters God dictates the dimensions of the tabernacle, the ark, and the altar that Moses is to build in God's honor. But nowhere does it say that Moses dared utter even one word in response all that time. Moses is, for once, speechless before the holy.

Elijah in a later time, and on another mountain, Mt. Horeb, experienced the presence of God in dramatic fashion. Elijah experiences earthquake, wind, and fire but God is in none of these, but rather in the still small silence that followed the quaking.

If Moses and Elijah are any measure, it is sometimes on a mountainside that the most profound encounters with God occur, the ones that leave us speechless at the meeting. For what is there to say when one stands before the holy, before almighty God, maker of heaven and earth?

The story today of Jesus on the mountainside, like the stories of Moses and Elijah that precede it, describe an experience of the presence of God, in a holy setting, and portray for us what one can and cannot say in such an instance, what one is able to articulate and what one cannot articulate at all.

Jesus took Peter, James, and John with him up a high mountain and he was transfigured before them. His face shone like the sun, Matthew tells us. His clothes became dazzling white.

And before you could say, “gee whiz”, Moses and Elijah appeared with him, the men of mountaintop experiences, a tip that something profound was happening, as if the shining clothes were not enough.

And Peter, well meaning Peter, offered to build a triptych to mark the occasion, three booths large enough to hold Jesus, Moses, and Elijah forever, a roadside chapel for all to see. But as is often the case with mountaintop experiences of great ecstasy and joy, there was no keeping it bottled up or preserved, except in memory. So before Peter can even get his proposal for a chapel out of his mouth, God interrupted and said, “This is my beloved Son, listen to him.” So much for booths, so much for Peter’s bright ideas poorly articulated.

It would have been better, I suppose, if Peter had kept silent altogether, rather than blurting out his offer to build a tripartite cathedral on the spot, an endless project no doubt if the Cathedral of St. John the Divine is any measure of the task.

But don’t be too hard on Peter. Sometimes all you can do in the face of the holy is offer up what little you have, stuttering and inarticulate as it may be.

All our sacred language, after all, are only attempts to capture in words something profoundly holy which are in truth only proximate expressions of a greater truth than we can express, for as St. Paul put it so well, now we understand only *in part*. Human words, after all, can never fully capture the essence of the divine.

I see this nearly every Sunday when we get to that part of the service that bears the creed, that moment of truth that we introduce with the bold invitation, “We have heard God’s word proclaimed, now let us stand and affirm our faith, using the words of the Apostle’s Creed, or the Brief Statement of Faith, or the Nicene Creed, or whatever creed is printed in the bulletin that day.”

And we stand there for a moment before God and one another and try to put into words what it is that we believe. And of course some people just blurt it all out from memory. Every word of it, no problem.

And others of us were never taught those words, never memorized them for our confirmation, have trouble reading them in the hymnbook, so we stumble on the words and ponder them in our hearts, and fall silent at the phrases that are hard for us to embrace as our own. Phrases like “born of the virgin Mary,” “the third day he rose from the dead,” “...the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting.” The creeds of the church are hard for many to express and sometimes even harder to embrace.

We ask all our candidates for ministry who are preparing for ordination, to write a statement of faith so that the presbytery can judge the orthodoxy of the candidate’s beliefs. Some of these statements are wonderful; and some are rote, a kind of restatement of the Apostle’s Creed; and some are lacking in essential parts; but all are imperfect, even the best of them, because they all tell us so much more about the faith and doubt of the candidates than they do about God, which, of course, is what we all hope to know more deeply ...God.

How do you capture the profound nature of the sacred in something so profane as words? No wonder we fumble for exactitude. Maybe we would all be better served by keeping silence at the time of the creed, except that the silence would only isolate our loneliness in faith and not connect us to one another as members of the body of Christ.

Mother Theresa was once interviewed by Dan Rather and you could just tell that Rather was having a good time with this, a cynical edge coming through in every question.

Dan Rather asked Mother Theresa, “What do you say to God when you pray?” And Mother Theresa said, “Nothing, I just listen.”

“Ah,” said Rather, moving in for the kill, “And what does God say to you?” “Nothing,” replied Mother Theresa, “He just listens.”

There is a sense in which the deepest of what is holy cannot ever be captured in words, cannot ever be expressed in language. And yet we try, inarticulate as we are, because faith must find words to hang onto, like steel pitons to the climber scaling the mountainside, they are all that we have to keep us from falling sometimes.

There is a story going around that two friends were talking about the creed in church. One was having trouble using the ancient words of the confessions. “I have so many doubts,” the one man said to the other, “how can I stand up and affirm that about which I have such fundamental questions? You don’t seem to have a problem with it. How is it that you can say the creeds so easily?”

“Oh that’s no problem,” said the other man, “I just start out saying ‘*They* believe in God the Father almighty, Maker of heaven and earth...’” And maybe that’s not all bad. Maybe we depend on each other’s affirmation of faith more than we realize.

Will Willimon, former dean of the chapel at Duke, tells the story of a church history professor at Yale Divinity School who once invited an Orthodox priest to be a guest lecturer.

He offered a dry talk on the history of the creeds, at the end of which an earnest student asked, “Father Theodore, what can one do when one finds it impossible to affirm certain tenets of the creed? The priest looked confused. “Well, you just say it. It’s not that hard to master. With a little effort, most can learn it by heart.”

“No you don’t understand,” continued the student, “what am I to do when I have difficulty affirming parts of the creed – like the Virgin Birth?” The priest still looked confused. “You just say it. It will come to you eventually.”

The frustrated student now pleaded, “How can I with integrity affirm a creed in which I do not believe?”

“It’s not your creed, young man!” said the priest. “It’s our creed. Keep saying it, for heaven’s sake! Eventually it will come to you.”<sup>i</sup>

Now, while this encounter may hit our ears as a failure to communicate, there is a kernel of truth worth understanding. There is an important sense in which the creeds of

the church are not about our faith, or our doubt, but about the faith of the church that we hold in trust for one another.

The creeds in our worship are not a test. They are not orthodoxy on trial, and it is not a pass-fail situation when we say the creeds.

I want to suggest to you that saying the creed in our worship service is a ministry of affirmation and support that we offer one another every bit as much as we offer them as an affirmation before God.

Our minds wander to heresy trials or the Spanish Inquisition or to the examination of Thomas á Beckett when we say the creeds, as if it were our faith that was being measured. We feel self-conscious if we have doubts about the virgin birth or the resurrection of the dead. We wonder whether we can really be Christian if we cannot take the loyalty oath.

But that is not what the affirmation of faith in our weekly service of worship is. It is not about us, it is about the faith of the church and how our corporate faith sustains and nurtures our individual faith even when our own faith is fragile and doubting.

All of us have times in our life when our faith flags, when we are weary and heavy laden by doubt, and fear, and by questions that do not go away. In the dark times of the spirit the church stands each week and affirms its faith using words that have been handed down from other times and other expressions, Christians who have gone before us who have tried to point to the Way, the Truth, the Life, in the hope that we may be sustained in faith when our faith is weak and our doubts are strong.

We say the creed *for* each other. We hold one another up in times of doubt, and sustain one another in times of confusion. The affirmation of faith is a ministry we undertake for the sake of each other. And it makes no difference whether I *get* the Virgin Birth or not, or you question the resurrection of the dead, or someone over there has doubts about whether God is the maker of heaven and earth. We say the creed not because God needs us to explain to God what God has done, but because we need to say it for each other as an expression of our oneness in Christ and our dependence on one another to hold that faith. It is the essential starting place of the priesthood of all believers. And ultimately and most importantly, it pleases God that we do so.

On any given Sunday, there is someone here whose faith is on fire, and whose energy for God is off the charts in strength. So every word of the creed can be spoken with conviction.

And somewhere as well in the sanctuary is someone who is grieving and whose tears so choke out every word they say that the creed is all they have to hang onto, even if they have not the ability to say it.

And somewhere in the sanctuary is someone who has been hurt by the church, marginalized by the church, belittled by the church, who still believes in God but who has real serious reservations about the holiness of the holy catholic church of which we are a part, wounded as they are by the church itself.

And somewhere in the sanctuary is someone whose faith is still in formation, who is new to the whole enterprise of discipleship and who is so filled with awe and wonder at a faith that they barely understand.

We are all of us here, reaching out in the dark, searching for a hand to hold onto, hoping that our darkness may become light; our blindness, sight; our despair, hope; or doubt, faith.

Standing on that mountainside, Peter did the best he could to articulate his faith, and it might have been better if he had kept silence, such is the nature of God's mystery. We never capture God's true essence in words. But it shouldn't keep us from trying. Because we all depend more than we know on the faith of one another to keep us going.

So do not worry that you have not words. Do not fret that the creed says more than you can say. It's not your creed. It's the church's creed. And those who cannot say the whole thing, say what you can; and when you cannot say anything at all, don't worry, we'll say it for you, until at last if not on earth, then in heaven, it is made abundantly clear what it is we have been trying to say all this long time.

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<sup>i</sup> As quoted in "Formed by the Saints," an article by William H. Willimon, in the *Christian Century*. February 7-14, 1996, vol. 113. no. 5, 137.