

“Holding the Moment”

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

There are two ways to look at the world. As a place in need of escape or the place to escape to. Or you could say it like this— as a place filled with the blessings of God or a place cursed by sin initiated by our own hand. Think about it— creation is either a good gift of God enchanted with his grace or a testing ground passing away. So whether you are Christian or pagan or something else you view the world in one of two ways— a trap or a gift.

Stories old gods of the ancient near eastern culture from which we get the bible were fraught with trickery and violence. These anthropomorphic gods were tricksters. They laid traps for their human subjects. They demanded sacrifices. There were wars between these trickster gods by which our home here on earth was created. The Babylonians told a creation story about their god Marduk who defeated the monster of the sea Tiamot... Marduk split Tiamot in two creating heaven and earth.

The druids of Ireland told mythical stories of shapeshifters and tricksters who used magic to trick people. The gods of their stories are terrifying. No one would want to come face to face with these gods. In one classic story the night before the last battle between Connacht and Ulster, a sinister shape-changing goddess called the Morrigan spoke “in the half light between the two camps,” describing in gory detail all the horrors of the coming battle. And that night two war goddesses, “called out to the men of Ireland in the field, and a hundred warriors died of fright. The story ends with these words: “It was a bad night for them.” I’d say so.

These are terrifying stories of what ancient peoples thought happened when you draw near to God. There are differences and similarities between these stories and biblical stories. And by comparing them we can see how different the biblical worldview is from that of the prevailing culture of their time. Theologian Rudolf Otto says that we are both drawn to God and yet terrified of holy encounters. We

can see that within the stories of the bible; and we can see that certainly from the myths of Babylon and Ireland. Moments where the glory of God are made known are terrifying. The door posts of the temple shake when Isaiah encounters the Lord. It was a deep, terrifying silence where Elijah encounters God. The whole mountain shook with thunder and a dark cloud covered it when Moses met God face to face. So, when Peter, James and John encountered God in the presence of Jesus on the mount of transfiguration they were terrified. There was this belief that no one could see God's face and live. They thought that kind of holiness is deadly. That glory is too much.

It was too much for the Israelites; they told Moses to cover it up. Every time he went in before the Lord to speak to God his face would shine. Moses' face shined and it made everybody nervous. They said, "Put a veil on it! You're gonna kill us all." But, Moses always took off that veil before going before the Lord. 'How did he live?' That must have been what all the Israelites thought when they heard this story— as it was passed down generation to generation. Moses knew God face to face.

Numbers 12 even says he knew God 'mouth to mouth.' Is this because Moses is so great and so holy that he is able to stand before the Lord? Scripture seems to go out of its way to say that is not the case. Moses is a murderer, remember? He can't talk? So Aaron has to talk for him. He fails like every other human. He isn't even worthy enough to enter the promised land. Moses is human. So maybe what we are meant to learn here... what Israelites who passed this story on for generations after generation are meant to learn here is that God's holiness is his goodness and that goodness is good to encounter. Yes, it can be terrifying, but it is good. And in that holy encounter we learn who we are and whose we are. We don't need to be terrified of God because an encounter with God will end our lives... encounters with God bring us to life. God's glory shining through in this world is not as rare as we think.

When Jesus' face began to shine on the mountain and his clothes turned dazzling white— surely Peter, James and John began to think of all those stories they remembered hearing about Moses talking to God. Then all of a

sudden there's Moses and Elijah talking to Jesus about the exodus he was about to accomplish in Jerusalem. The word translated departure in verse 31 is the Greek word that is translated in other contexts as exodus. Peter feels the need to respond and to do something— they're weighed down by sleep but they have stayed awake for this moment. As Moses and Elijah are leaving Peter says that he will build three shelters— for Jesus, Moses and Elijah. Kind of like the Israelites would do for the festival of booths where they built shelters to remind the people of their time in the wilderness... he's reaching for the right religious move here. Were Peter a baptist he would have suggested that he start 3 committees and a 4th to nominate for those proposed committees. Jesus doesn't even have to answer him; instead a cloud comes over them (reminiscent of the one that used to come over Moses at Sinai) and a voice says, "This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!"

In other words, don't set your experience in stone yet. Don't distract from the moment of glory with worrying about how you're going to record this moment. Sometimes I'll catch myself at my

daughter's basketball game or gymnastics class or church choir thinking about how I should be recording this so I can always replay it... and I end up missing the moment fumbling for my phone or looking at the moment through my screen instead of holding the moment and accepting it as a gift. I wonder if that's what's going on with Peter.

But, there's another reason that Peter doesn't need to build shelters on the mountain. Because that might confuse the point of this moment. The point of this moment is not to point out that this is a holy mountain. This mountain is not holier than the plain below. All the earth is alive with the glory of God. We just don't always have eyes to see it. The point is not that this place is holy... the point is that all places are holy. The whole earth is enchanted with the grace of its creator. If we build our shelters on mountains we miss the holiness of the plain.

Author Diana Butler Bass and her family went to a place called Ring Lake Ranch in Wyoming a couple of hours east of Yellowstone. On their first visit, the director warned them to be careful after dark. City dwellers aren't used to night

without electric lights. Diana wasn't entirely sure what he meant. But then the sun set. She says, "It seemed like a thick wool blanket had been pulled over my head. All light disappeared." She had forgotten her flashlight, and feared she would not make it back to her cabin. Trying not to panic, she sat on the lodge stairs and wondered what to do.

But, in a few minutes, her eyes adjusted to the night's lesser lights. The moon was bright, but it was not the only source of light. The sky was pulsating with millions of stars. Without a moment's reflection, the words of an old hymn sounded in her mind: "Consider all the worlds thy hands have made." The word "consider," comes from a French word that literally means to "observe the stars."¹ It's how we pause to reflect, learn, study and grow. We might say the word to Peter, James and John here on the mountain is— Consider the one among you... consider this moment. Consider the world around you and the grace that finds you even in the dark.

Luke begins this story by saying, "About 8 days later..." That's no coincidence. In the early church

the 8th day was a symbol of new creation. The exodus was not only the basis for the Hebrew understanding of salvation, it too was a symbol of creation. In the Exodus God separated the waters and brought his people through on dry land... just as in the beginning God separated the waters of chaos and brought forth the land. And the difference between that story in the bible and the Babylonian story is also significant. The earth is not created through violence... the earth (and all of creation) is not at its core a place of violence and struggle. No first and foremost it is a home meant for the flourishing and delight of God's beloved... a place to walk and talk with the divine face to face, hand in hand, heart to heart.

Sure, we may have played our part to turn this world into a house of horrors; we've crafted weapons of mass destruction. We build walls to protect us from God's beloved. We veil our faces to keep us from shining with the glory of God because we worry that if we truly encountered the glory of God in our lives we would die— and the truth is when we encounter the glory of God the shallow lives we lead often are shown to be what they are— waste. But, new life is

found. The voice from the cloud calls to us to listen to the chosen One. Will we? Or will we continue to believe the lie that this world is evil... that we are only sinners... that there is no hope... that the powers of this world are too much for us so we might as well go along. God is calling us down from our mountains... out of our shelters... unveil your face and see the way it shines with God's glory. There is nothing in this world that you cannot overcome through the One who has already made his exodus and welcomes us to new creation now.

My youngest daughter turns 4 today. She's growing up. She's doing more and more on her own. The other day she woke up and played in her room for a while. The rest of the house was dark. She woke up turned on her light and went into her closet to get dressed. Then she ran into our room and woke up her mom. She said, "I love my room now." She proudly announced that there's nothing to be scared of in her room. She checked under the bed and found that there are in fact no monsters under there. I laughed at first; then I thought, 'Wow, in the mind of a 3 year old that's a big move confronting monsters in your own

room. Walking in the dark, turning the light on.' That's the kind of thing that makes a father proud—not just your child growing up, but growing brave.

At the heart of this world is not a trickster God; it is the Christ. Light of the world. Lord of all creation. When the world gets scary. We can turn a light on.

¹ Diana Butler Bass, *Grounded*, (Harper One: 2015) ebook, ch. 3.