

Shine, Jesus, Shine

I'll start off today with an announcement: it's to let you know that my Doctor of Ministry dissertation, my thesis, is now officially published and available for reading. You can download a copy from the Duke University Library website, and there's a link to that on the Trinity website. For those of you who prefer to hold a book in your hands, I've also ordered some printed copies, and I'll let you know when they arrive.

Now, this is not just an advertisement for my thesis. I'm bringing this up in the context of the sermon because the argument at the heart of my thesis is very much related to the central theme of our gospel text for today.

The common link between my thesis and Matthew's story of the Transfiguration that Maureen read for us is the central question of the identity of Jesus. Who is Jesus for us? Who do we say that Jesus is?

Now, we tell this strange story of the Transfiguration every year in the church, and each year we hear from a different gospel writer; this year it's Matthew's turn. We tell the story on Transfiguration Sunday, which is always the last Sunday in the season of Epiphany, the last Sunday before the season of Lent begins.

Really, the whole point of the season of Epiphany is to point us toward a clear understanding of Jesus' identity. It's to help us to see who Jesus is, and how Jesus is a manifestation—an epiphany—of God.

Sometimes Scripture is very obvious about this. At the other end of the Epiphany season, near the beginning, the church tells the story of Jesus' baptism. In Matthew's telling of that story, a voice from heaven says, "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased." That's echoed in today's passage: "This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!" Pretty clear, right? It's fairly obvious that the voice from heaven is God speaking. So Scripture is telling us that Jesus is the Son of God.

But in case we missed the obvious echo between these two passages, with God saying directly, "This is my Son." Scripture also adds in all these other clues, so that it practically hits us over the head with what it is trying to tell us.

You hear the echoes between the passage from Exodus and the scene in Matthew: you go up a mountain, and there you meet God; there is bright cloud that covers the mountain, and God speaks from the cloud. Scripture

couldn't be more obvious in what it is trying to tell us. Jesus is the Son of God.

For the original Jewish disciples of Jesus there is the additional detail of the appearance of Moses and Elijah, perhaps representing two important streams of Jewish tradition, the Law and the Prophets. Their temporary appearance beside Jesus testifies to a Jewish audience that Jesus is the Messiah.

Scripture is being really obvious in what it is trying to tell us. So the question is, Why? Why is Scripture trying so hard to get its point across? Why is it hitting us over the head with its message?

This week I read an essay by a woman named Fleming Rutledge. She is a preacher and teacher in the Episcopal church in the United States. She writes about reading through the entire Gospel of Matthew, and she comes to this conclusion: "The Gospel of Matthew lives, breathes, and pours out its summons. Its entire purpose is that we should see and believe that Jesus of Nazareth is Messiah and Son of God."

Rutledge further suggests that, as obvious as Scripture is trying to be with us, we work very hard not to hear what it's trying to say. We are determined, sometimes, to have the Bible be about other things than what it is really about. She writes:

Most of us in the church have been so deeply affected by cultural trends that we don't realize how far we've drifted from the central message. The Bible is not a story of a search for

God, or a history of the religious consciousness of the Hebrew people, or a guide to human spiritual development. It is not an all-purpose resource for our needs in the usual sense. Everyone in the churches these days seems to be talking about his or her spiritual journey—but the fundamental story of the Bible is not about *our* journey at all. It's about what [Karl] Barth calls "the journey of the Son of God into the far country."

Those are the words of Fleming Rutledge. You may recognize there the reference to the parable of the prodigal son—the journey to the far country. The suggestion is that the Bible is fundamentally about God coming near to us, the story of the Incarnation, God taking on flesh and dwelling with us.

God seeking us out, and not leaving us on our own. The Gospel of John says, For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son. And in today's story, too, God-in-Jesus comes to the disciples in their fear, and touches them, and encourages them. And then remains with them as they travel down the mountain together. It's a story of God with us, Emmanuel.

This is the Good News: God is with us; God comes to us; God will not leave us on our own. In our fear, in our distress; when all seems lost, when we don't know what to make of events in the world, we are not alone; God is with us.

What happens on the mountaintop is an epiphany, a revelation of the true nature of reality.

We think we live in the world we see and touch and taste and feel and hear; we think that's all there is, but on the mountaintop shining Jesus says, No, it's not like that at all. God is with you; God is here, with you, right now. Every bit as real—no, more real—than what you call reality. As the poet says, the world is indeed charged with the grandeur of God. God is with us.

This is the Good News the Bible is trying to tell us, if we would only listen. But in our day and age, we have a hard time listening to the Bible. Partly because we have serious questions and doubts about it, and partly because we think we know better.

We live in a time, and in a culture, that sets the autonomy of the individual, personal freedom of choice, above almost everything else. We believe that we have the right, and even the responsibility, to decide what Scripture can mean for us. We try to make the Bible fit our agendas, rather than shape our lives to fit the Bible's agenda.

Now Rutledge makes an important point here. After telling us what the purpose of the Gospel of Matthew is, that Matthew is making the claim that Jesus is the Messiah and Son of God, she says, You don't have to believe that claim. You can wrestle with it; you can say that it's unbelievable, that it is too strange and wonderful to be true. You can spend a lifetime pondering the mystery of it. But what you can't do, she says, is to try and silence the message of the gospels, or

try to make them say something that they don't say.

This is where my thesis comes in. I make the argument that in our day and age, particularly since the 1960s, that we've become uncomfortable about a whole lot of things that our Scriptures and traditions say.

We can no longer make sense of many of the traditional doctrines of the church, the doctrines which our United Church embraced at its founding in 1925. And so our response, particularly since the 1960s, has been to kind of snip out all the parts that we find objectionable. We've tailored a faith to suit our tastes, and our intellectual and spiritual fashions.

Miracle stories? Snip. Virgin birth? Snip. Bodily resurrection? Snip.

Without doubt, the most important thing that we have tended to cut out is our ability to affirm the straightforward message of gospel texts like the one we heard today. That Jesus of Nazareth is the Messiah and Son of God, the Second Person of the Trinity, God incarnate. That Jesus is God.

What the thesis argues is, that if we can't affirm this, well, that may be the root of our troubles as a church.

Our calling is to share this story, this Good News. Our calling is to offer people a way into a relationship with the transcendent God of the Bible, the God who comes to us in human flesh in Jesus.

If we offer something less than that: a story of Jesus as a very good man who taught some very good things—chances are that that story just isn't strong enough to do the heavy lifting, to bring about the kind of transformation that our world needs, especially in the era of Trumpism.

We need more than good advice from good humans; we need God's Good News. If we offer anything less than that, then we're not doing our job as a church.

Now—let me be very clear. I personally have never been troubled by any of the traditional teachings or doctrines of the church. I accept them as the wisdom of our ancestors. That said, I don't claim to understand all these things. I don't have a ready, locked down, answer to every question about God, and how God interacts with us and with the world, and why bad things happen.

I do have a fundamental trust in God. That God is real, and that God is with us.

There are many things from Christian tradition—whether it's the words of some prayers and songs, the words of some of our traditional creeds, and indeed some of our United Church doctrine—there are many things that make me flinch or wince when I read them. It's still awkward and uncomfortable for me to say, "The blood of Christ shed for you" during Communion.

So yes, I struggle with some of this, too. I was trained up in a

progressive United Church congregation, and attended a liberal United Church seminary. So I continue to wrestle with some of the language, and the teachings, and theology.

But what I am not willing to do is to impose my own standards, my own tastes and preferences, on what our tradition has handed down, to say what can remain and what needs to go. That, it seems to me, is the height of arrogance: to think I know better than every Christian who has ever lived.

So I invite you to join me in this perspective: to take what Scripture and our tradition offers to us; to wrestle with it, to object to it; sometimes to be tenderly embraced by it, or blessed by it; but just not to reject it, or exclude it out of hand. We just don't know sometimes where the blessings are, or where God might show up—sometimes it's in the very things we would turn away from.

At the end of the service today, we are going to sing "Shine, Jesus, Shine."

Some of us may struggle with some of the words. Jesus is called Lord and God is called Father. And one of the verses mentions blood. We had some talk about whether we should snip that verse out to make it fit our sensibilities better. And I said, No, it needs to stay there.

We are allowed to feel uncomfortable; some of us may choose not to sing certain parts. And others will hear in those same words powerful affirmation of their faith. And a bunch

of us may sing and wince a little. But all of us will have the opportunity for an encounter with some unedited words and images and wisdom from our tradition.

I want to close with a prayer from Will Willimon:

“Jesus, show us your glory. Lift us out of the drab, humdrum routine of our everyday lives and shine in the fullness of your majesty. Appear to us when we least expect you. Show up and shatter our ordinariness. Give us evidence of your reign among us. Shine, Jesus, shine.

Also be with us, good Lord, in the low places of our lives, the valleys, the dark nights when the challenges of this life in this world grind us down. Walk with us. In walking with us, you enable every journey, no matter how difficult, to be endurable. Hold our hands, precious Lord. Walk with us, lead us on, and help us to go on.

Because you are with us in both our shining, mountaintop experiences and also in our shadow-filled valleys, we have hope and courage no matter where life’s journey takes us. Thanks be to God!”

Amen.

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