

February 23, 2020

## What Language Shall We Borrow?

Annette Hill Briggs

Matthew 17:1-9

**17** Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and his brother John and led them up a high mountain, by themselves. **2** And he was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became dazzling white. **3** Suddenly there appeared to them Moses and Elijah, talking with him. **4** Then Peter said to Jesus, “Lord, it is good for us to be here; if you wish, I will make three dwellings here, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.” **5** While he was still speaking, suddenly a bright cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud a voice said, “This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!” **6** When the disciples heard this, they fell to the ground and were overcome by fear. **7** But Jesus came and touched them, saying, “Get up and do not be afraid.” **8** And when they looked up, they saw no one except Jesus himself alone.

**9** As they were coming down the mountain, Jesus ordered them, “Tell no one about the vision until after the Son of Man has been raised from the dead.”

At its best a sermon is words strung together in such a way that people hear what actually cannot be spoken. Once in a while it works – not nearly as often as good sermons are preached – which has to do with expectations and our love of words well-written-and-spoken and our reluctance to pray. Our willingness to settle for the crumbs which fall from other tables. And yet our lives in Christ and this life together that we share is centered around and rooted in Mystery, unspeakable mystery. Roaring silence, the space between the notes and the words.

Do you recognize the title of the sermon “*What language shall I borrow?*” from the hymn “*O Sacred Head Now Wounded*”? The song is specifically about the agony of crucifixion. *What language shall I borrow To thank Thee, dearest Friend, For this, Thy dying sorrow, Thy pity without end?* But that one line rises above the topic to point out the insufficiency of all language to speak of the mystery which is God with any sort of accuracy. Making it no wonder that here on this mountaintop Peter, James, and John sound more like Larry, Curly and Moe than the pillars of Christendom they would one day be.

In the poor, lisping, stammering tongue of our faith, let us pray: *For your spirit to come upon us in ways for which we can stay present, O God, we pray. Amen.*

By this time in Matthew’s telling of the gospel, Jesus has done oodles of miracles. He’s taken the disciples to a place of many gods called Caesarea Philippi where he asks them if they know which god **he** is, where Peter spits it out and Jesus confirms that he is the Messiah, the Son of God. After which, he straightforwardly describes to them his

impending suffering, death and resurrection – which they promptly reject, argue and promise him it will absolutely, positively never happen.

All of this in the usual manner of human conversation, the same vocabulary and grammar with which the people around them shared recipes and talked to their goats. Larry, Curly and Moe were the only ones Jesus took with him up the mountain, the only ones there to see Jesus in his unspeakable fullness, unzipped and turned inside out, his humanity somewhere folded up and tucked away into some pocket of his eternity. They see and hear it plainly: Jesus standing, talking with Moses and Elijah. How they recognized them is its own mystery. They just knew. But for the life of them, they could not say what they were seeing, which doesn't mean Peter didn't speak. As my second preaching professor used to say, "*Having nothing to say doesn't slow down every preacher.*"

The heavens interrupt him, repeating the baptism announcement, "*This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!*" Who wouldn't fall down overcome with fear? And then the moment passed. Jesus was himself again, eternity tucked away. They have their warning not to talk about it – easy-peasy, since they still didn't know the words.

A veil they didn't know existed had been drawn back. The world they knew was not all there was to know. And there was a sort of crossing – a way between the world they knew and all the rest they'd never known. Jesus apparently knew the way and was letting them in on this strange mystery, and NOT JUST THAT! but also suggesting it was nothing to be feared.

This inside-out-ness could be seen and heard. Then ordinary life resumed, just like "*Walk back down the mountain and don't mention it for now. Carry it like a secret, even if it feels like your heart just might explode.*" I personally have not seen Jesus, or anyone else for that matter, shimmering like the sun. But I have been in thin places where the veil between this world and the next is incredibly sheer. As sheer as gossamer.

On an ordinary school night in college my boyfriend and I sneaked into the balcony of a jazz concert. It was one of those rare occasions when the music literally transports the self into a different state of being. The times I have been in birthing rooms, dying rooms. The first time I saw *Saving Private Ryan*, the opening thirty minutes of that movie left me speechless. Music and art are bridges from here to there, maybe – maybe all creative efforts, tiny efforts on our part to tap our desire to touch the eternal, to confirm our human hope and hunches, that eternity is reaching out for us.

Nature brims with the eternal. Science has quantified it so that it's easy to forget that science did not invent it. It only captured it with words and graphics, as if our **knowing**

it somehow makes it ours. Yoga teaches us that in our knowing we realize there is no end, no bottom to the knowing – most of all the knowing of the self.

Our breath itself is a mystery. Where does it come from? We have the mechanics to breathe, but do not manufacture breath. We can design a dog now – a schnoodle, for example; but we cannot fabricate the breath it needs to live. We draw the first, exhale the last. We are born to live, then die. But the breath that was in us carries on. Breath is always eternal spirit.

Until that day on the mountain, all Larry, Curly and Moe had of Jesus were his words and deeds: the words they heard him say and the deeds they saw him do. They themselves – Peter, James and John, that is – went on to preach and speak and write words on words on words. Mark's gospel is thought to be Peter's account, where everything happens *immediately* and the story ends with all the disciples running away too frightened to tell anyone they'd seen the risen Christ.

But are their words all we have of those disciples? More the same, of course, of Jesus. Is the Bible text what we know best of him? These stories and sayings passed down? Or have we seen and heard him up close and lately, in ways for which we have no words? In memories that shimmer, that make us feel turned inside-out? That make the world seem tilted, aching with beauty and with joy? That instead of speaking, we can only carry, like something fragile and very, very precious. And, at least for me, never in big bites – always in tiny, little pieces. Sometimes tinier than that. Just enough to know it's there, then lose my appetite for lesser things.

To taste and then thirst for nothing else – what Jesus once called *the living water* – to touch even the very hemline of eternity is enough to make us well and to know this world will never make us truly happy. Our joy, our livelihood is drawn from a different well: the *transmundane* (my second-best new word this week – *noetic* being the first, which I learned from Becky), the source of our very breath, our lives, our life together, some time, somewhere beyond these bodies, these time-and-space-bound lives, these never-ending words, the mystery that contains and carries us, even as we carry it through these ordinary lives of ours.

Let's pray.