

Audio Video Deity
Transfiguration Sunday
February 11, 2018
Trinity Bixby
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[Mark 9: 2-27](#)
[1 Kings 19:3-13a](#)

The world of the Theatre can be almost magical. The way that actors play out scenes can make us forget that we are, really, just sitting with a few hundred people in a dark box and instead buy into the shared experience of the live stage. Acting is a big part of the experience, but the technical aspects are fascinating, too. Back in my theatre days, I witnessed directors agonized over which gel color to use to get the light exactly the color they were looking for – the difference, it turns out, between burgundy and maroon makes a huge difference! As I was often in charge of climbing up into the catwalk and leaning over the railing to place the gels onto the instrument, rather than choosing the colors, these constant changes were close to driving me crazy on many occasions. Light color – and light intensity – are a big addition to helping shape the experience of the theatre.

The other thing that makes lighting so critical is deciding when and how to block it. Gobos are metal cutouts that are placed along with gels in front of the lighting instrument to create different effects. For instance, a gobo of leaf shapes makes a dappled appearance, like the actors are walking through a forest. A gobo of thick lines can make the appearance of a stained-glass window. It's not just the presence of the light, but the absence of it that strikes the audience as real and contributes to the so-called, "willing suspension of disbelief" – that characteristic that transports us from the dark box to the middle of Sherwood forest, or Mina Harker's bedroom, or the Emerald City.

We find in our Bible stories today sketches that seem to leap out at us in their theatricality – the usually-sparse Mark records a lot of details about Jesus' transfiguration experience, while Elijah experiences a direct unveiling of God high on a mountain. These experiences of God revealing Godself to us are traditionally labeled with the Greek word, "theophany" – from Theos, God and

Phanein, to show. Theophany, then, means “Godshow” (or “God’s showing”).

These scripture texts, these “episodes of Theophany, the Godshow,” are meant to be incredibly captivating. You can almost see Elijah, despairing in the desert, waking up to the miraculous breakfast prepared by an angel. Smell the freshly-baked bread, feel the heat of the stones, and the refreshing feel of the jug of water. Then, like Elijah, you are refreshed enough for forty days and nights of wandering in the wilderness, the wasteland of broken rocks and scrub brush, until arriving, haggard and bedraggled at the dark cave on Mount Sinai. There, again as you wake up, a voice calls out: “What are you doing here?”

As though you weren’t already scared enough! Elijah, though, bravely calls out, “I have zealously served Adonai, God Almighty. But the people of Israel have broken their covenant with you, torn down your altars, and killed every one of your prophets. I am the only one left, and now they are trying to kill me, too.”

Elijah has a problem. He has preached God’s message for so long that he has forgotten to listen for God’s voice. Previously, Elijah challenged some 400 priests of the pagan god Baal to call down fire – and when he succeeded and they failed, he caused them all to be killed. Now, feeling like no one is listening to his words about God, he is in the midst of despair, thinking he has failed God. But God calls Elijah to stand outside the cave and watch. A windstorm sweeps up out of nowhere, breaking loose rocks, howling and eroding the mountain – but, our text tells us, “Adonai was not in the wind.” Then, to make the point even clearer, God sends a destructive earthquake and a firestorm – but God wasn’t in either. Lastly, in the King James vernacular, was a small, still voice – the gentle whisper of truth. There, at last, was God’s presence.

Elijah, the first great prophet since Moses, had forgotten to listen for God’s voice. God isn’t in the fire of destruction or the fury of the windstorm – but in the truth and love that is passed from one to another. And though Elijah had lost faith in the path God set before him, God was able to remind Elijah of what he had yet to do – select his successor, and anoint new kings for Israel and Aram, that the people could once again hear God’s still, small voice. Once that was accomplished, Elijah was, instead of dying under a broom tree, called to “walk with the Lord” and taken to heaven in a chariot of fire.

The details of the story are meticulously chosen and crafted to capture our attention, just as the directors chose their lighting and sound effects carefully in the theatre. For many people, their first encounter with the technical knowledge of the theatre came through the various A/V clubs in schools. A/V, you may recall, stands for Audio + Video, which in turn mean, “I hear” and “I see” in Latin. When they were used in the ancient world, these phrases had additional subtleties: *audio* comes with the sense of “I’m listening and will do what you say” while *video* comes with the sense of “I see and understand.” When choosing what technical elements to include, then, the directors of theatrical productions are looking for ways to help the audience see and understand – and hear the underlying message of the play.

Now, let’s head over to the Markan episode of “Theophany: the Godshow,” which brings us amazingly clear details amidst a muddy background. Here, Jesus, Elijah, and Moses appear, but we don’t hear their voices. Instead, everything takes place from Peter’s perspective, with Jesus’ clothes turning pure white and radiant – the Greek here means “reflecting lustre,” like polished brass or steel, rather than shining with its own light. Peter offers to build wooden shelters for the three prophetic figures – and is ignored completely. Interestingly, the word for shelters, or shrines, that is used here is “*skenas*” – which literally means hut, but is the root of our word “scenery,” or the place that costumes and masks are kept in Greek theatrical tradition. It also is the rendering of the Hebrew *sukkoth*, usually translated as “booths,” or the wilderness huts in which the Israelites traditionally lived on the journey from Egypt to the promised land. Now, it seems like a random thing for Peter to do, but he is making a connection to the Jewish tradition (taken from the prophet Zechariah) that the Age to Come would begin during the Feast of Booths.

Instead of any of the prophetic figures responding to Peter’s intuitive leap, a voice calls out an echo of Jesus’ baptism: “This is my Son, whom I dearly love. Listen to him!” and BAM – Jesus is alone with the disciples. They make their way down the mountain, and Jesus tells them not to tell anyone what they have seen until after his death and resurrection.

But that’s not really the end of the transfiguration – because after Jesus

and the three mountaineer disciples return to the town, they find the other nine have been completely unable to heal a boy suffering from a demon possession – with symptoms of what sounds like epilepsy. Like Elijah before them, the disciples have grown proud in “their ability to heal” and forgotten to listen for God’s voice in their midst. The boy’s father asks Jesus, “If you can do anything, help us! Show us compassion!” Now, I can picture Jesus raising an eyebrow, saying, “If I can do anything? All things are possible for the one who believes.” And the boy’s father replies whole-heartedly, “I believe! Help my lack of belief.” Then, Jesus heals the boy, and later rebukes the disciples in private: “Throwing out this kind of spirit requires prayer.”

You see, my friends, there is a theme running through these stories of theophany, these episodes of the Godshow. Whenever you think your gifts are sufficient to carry you, that exactly when you start to fail and despair. But God’s glory is present even when hidden from our hearing and sight. After all, the boy had been living in the shadow of reality: overshadowed not by God but by pain and difficulty and so much more. Jesus, though the radiance of his clothing is no longer visible, is able to reach through the darkness and bring the boy into the light. For that boy, this is a mountaintop experience. Finally, he is able to live life without constant pain, without constant fear. He has experienced a changing of the light – a brightening of the world – that is a display of God’s power and will. Claudio Carvalhaes, who was my worship professor at Louisville Seminary, picked up this theme and challenges us with it:

“Our world is dashing the poor against the rocks of despair, hunger, and abandonment everyday. The economic beast controlled by few demons is making our people convulse day and night. The homeless, the immigrant, the incarcerated, those mothers who work three jobs to make a minimum wage to feed three, four kids: they are like that boy, thrown into the shadows of our society, convulsing day and night right in front of us! And we, who seem to not know anything about the transfiguration of Jesus or our own transfiguration are looking at these people while asking Jesus: can we dwell in our worship tabernacles basking in your glory, away from the people and their pressing needs? Unless we get out of the fortress of our worship spaces, and rebuke the

unclean spirits of the powers that be, and shed light into the lives of the poor of our communities, we will never know what transfiguration means.”

For Claudio, as for us, the truth of transfiguration relies on being disciples of Jesus. Of seeing Jesus’ changing light not as a one-time, mountaintop experience, or a play in a darkened theatre, but as something to be lived into the world. To help those in need, who are convulsing and ignored. To not suspend our disbelief – but to live into our belief. For God reveals Godself to us in those moments where we feel so disconnected and alone, too – reminding us to listen to Jesus, to see God at work, and to respond with our whole hearts. When God asks, “What are you doing here?” our response ought to be, “I hear you, Lord. I see you, Holy God. Fill me with your Spirit that I might do your work of Love.”

I hear you, Lord. *Audio* – I hear and obey.

I see you, Holy God. *Video* – I see and understand.

Fill me with your Spirit, that I might do your work of Love. *Opero in Sancto Spiritus* – I work in the Holy Spirit.

Hear. See. Do.

Audio. Video. Opero.

Truly, God is the audio/video deity.

May the Voice of God speak to you in darkness and light. May the Light of the Spirit shine from you as it did from Jesus Christ. And may Christ’s example lead you to care for those wracked with pain, that God’s glory may amaze the world. Amen.