

Boot Camp for Life

Matthew 17:1-9

Transfiguration Sunday, March 6, 2010

Whitefish UMC

- ✦ Catherine Land learned life's lessons the hard way. The last good memory she had held a time when she and her mother rode in a carriage with young military cadets through the streets of New York. Soon her mother died in childbirth giving birth to her little sister Alice, and her father drank himself to death in grief.
- ✦ Although Catherine did everything she could to raise her baby sister and protect her from the perils of the city, they both eventually learned that the best way to survive was to numb themselves from any feeling of attachment at all. Catherine has conspired to answer a personal advertisement for an honest and reliable wife to a wealthy widower in a remote town in Wisconsin.
- ✦ Alice has finally run out of luck and resources and is dying on the streets of early 1900's St. Louis. These things we learn as the novel, The Reliable Wife, by Robert Goolrick, unfolds. Catherine, who is anything but honest and only reliable in her ability to coldly and cleverly dupe her new husband and anyone else who gets in her way, finds her long-lost sister at last.
- ✦ Catherine now has money and resources, and in a new awakening, wants to try again to save her sister. But it is too late. She kneels beside her dying sister in the filthy streets. Suddenly she sees a dazzling white light, and

what looks like an angel that she has seen in the books (from the library she frequents) of great Renaissance art descends over them.

- ✦ Hoping that the angel will save her sister, she shakes herself back to reality only to find her sister cold and dead. But something has happened to Catherine, and her frozen spirit begins to recognize and receive grace.
- ✦ By now you are asking “Why should I care about these people?” They are only characters in a novel, after all. With echoes of Wuthering Heights, the novels of Charles Dickens, and Daphne DuMaurier, it’s all a bit extreme. That’s what I thought, anyway, until I read the interview with the author at the end of the book.
- ✦ When the interviewer asked him about the source of this novel, Goolrick replied: “Read my memoir, and you’ll understand it.” Turns out Goolrick has written The End of the World as We Know It, in which truth is indeed stranger and more painful than fiction.
- ✦ Which all goes to show that the wise way to prepare for joy or sorrow in this life is to take the road of the Stoics of antiquity, among whom Jesus lived. Cut yourself off from emotion. Keep everyone and everything at a distance. Build a fortress around your soul. Do not risk the price of wonder or heartbreak.
- ✦ And now we’re moving into Lent, and the inevitability of the cross weighs heavy in our hearts. But there is nothing we can do to change the fate of our Lord, which makes me wonder whether he, too, was tempted to join the philosophical school of stoics around him. We know the story too well, and we remember his story as we endure stories of loss in our own lives.
- ✦ How do we cope with the friends who suffer, the child who is ill, the life that has fallen apart along with a lost job, the relationship that seems beyond healing? So the question is, will we follow the Stoics or will we risk

following Jesus up and down the mountain and risk the price of weeping and suffering, celebration and surprise, when life somehow is redeemed and grace is recognized and received?

- ✦ Peter, James, and John go with Jesus up the mountain after hearing the news of Jerusalem and Jesus' coming death. They demonstrate their humanity as in their minds they play out the next few days and weeks. They begin to look for alternatives—a second opinion—a way to stop time. Can't they just stay on the mountaintop in all the glory of the moment?
- ✦ They want to build a safe sanctuary away from the world, to be frozen in time, saving Jesus and themselves from the heartache to come. They cannot, nor can we.
- ✦ We have similar mountaintop experiences that we long to hold onto. And yet if we are mindful, we can use these glory moments to help us through hard times to come. But we have to use these mountaintop times as boot camp for the challenges ahead.
- ✦ We glimpse that kind of training moment in a conversation on a plane late at night, when a woman struggling with cancer recounts her sister's bravery and serenity in fighting the same disease and how it keeps her together, even though her sister is gone.
- ✦ We glimpse that bootcamp moment when we watch film of the struggles in Libya—the chaos and the violence, and then there is one story of a person's graceful act of healing by caring for another person the world would rather forget. And so God is present in both suffering and struggle and in the promise and potential—both places are Holy Ground.
- ✦ The moment of Jesus' transfiguration is just such bootcamp training for the disciples. On one hand, it affirms Jesus' holiness; on the other, it begins to give the disciples eyes to see God's light in the chaos to come: from death,

loss and fear come resurrection and the birth of the church by the Holy Spirit.

- ✦ The challenge for the disciples is to live in a world without Jesus' bodily presence. And the transfiguration anticipates that challenge, inviting us to live in the "light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ." (2 Cor. 4:6) As that light shines in our hearts, God incarnate, made flesh, is made real in every day.
- ✦ In the past few years the Narnia films have reminded us of some wonderful images from which to learn and grow. C. S. Lewis writes a final word from Aslan in The Silver Chair: "Here on the mountain I have spoken to you clearly. I will not often do so down in Narnia. Here on the mountain, the air is clear and your mind is clear; as you drop down in to Narnia, the air will thicken.
- ✦ Take great care that it does not confuse your mind. And the signs which you have learned here will not look at all as you expect them to look, when you meet them there. That is why it is so important to know them by heart and pay no attention to appearance. Remember the signs and believe the signs. Nothing else matters."
- ✦ What does this mean? God prepares people in the transcendent moments of our lives to endure the world below, the world of the cross, the world that has the ability to break us and yet is never beyond God's transforming and redeeming power. These encounters happen on mountaintops in a field of spring wildflowers, with the evening sun so blinding that we cannot see anything else.
- ✦ But they also happen in unexpected but ordinary times, in a late night conversation on a plane, in forgiving a past hurt or slight or mistake, in

making time for someone who isn't always lovable. These are the places where we make space for the holy to be present.

- ✦ As Maryetta Madeleine Anschutz says, "...the transfiguration offers the disciples the paradox that while there is nothing they can do to save themselves from suffering, there is also no way they can shield themselves from the light of God that sheds hope in their darkest moments.
- ✦ The mountain was the way to prepare a human band of companions for the sacred journey, to offer something to hold onto when they descend into the crushing reality of the world below."
- ✦ Have you ever noticed how a painting or another piece of art changes, depending on how much light is on it? In almost any medium, the artist simply depicts the reflection of light off an object or an idea. The still life of an apple can be flat, dull, and uninspiring. Or it can evoke emotion, reaction, and transcendence. And what evokes that response is not the object, but it is how the artist presents it in the light and how we respond to that reflection.
- ✦ "The moment of transfiguration is that point at which God says to the world and to each of us that there is nothing we can do to prepare for or stand in the way of joy or of sorrow. We cannot build God a monument, and we cannot keep God safe. We also cannot escape the light that God will shed on our path.
- ✦ We cannot escape God, Immanuel among us. God will find us in our homes and at work. God will find us when our hearts are broken and when we discover joy. God will find us when we run away from God and when we are sitting in the middle of what seems like hell. So 'get up and do not be afraid.'"

- ✦ Let this transfiguration remembrance become a boot camp experience for your life. Like any mountain climber, you have to train for the journey ahead. Notice the glory of even the smallest moments of grace. Pay attention to signs: believe them, remember them.
- ✦ Just as Jesus did, on the night he gave himself up for us, as we remember....Amen.

Sources:

Maryetta Madeleine Anschutz, "Matthew 17:1-9" in Feasting on the Word, 2010.