

Mysticism and Mission

Transfiguration

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Texts: 2 Kings 2.1-12;
 Psalm 50.1-6;
 2 Corinthians 4.3-6;
 Mark 9.2-9

I first starting praying with mystics in my mid 20s. I came across a series of devotional books called "Praying with..." Julian of Norwich, Catherine of Sienna, John of the Cross. Julian of Norwich was the one who kept calling me back. Her writing is called the "Showings", which is her word for the series of mystical visions she received when she was sick in early 30s.¹ Her writings, as she attempts to put words to her experience, are full of imagery, poetry, and extended metaphor. You can sense the passion and depth of God's love that was communicated to her through these visions.

I was drawn to her mysticism because I had lived for so long in the realm of the rational and logical. I grew up with an older brother who is now a lawyer who specializes in constitutional law. I've watched him argue before the Supreme Court. It is a sight to behold. His mind is a razor sharp; always has been. You cannot imagine what it was like trying to argue with him as a kid growing up! The one thing I can say is it helped to prepare me for the world of higher education which I pursued in a flurry. I got through college in three years. I went to seminary six weeks after finishing at Calvin. I took all my electives in systematic theology. I pretty much lived 24/7 in my head.

Then I hit the parish at 24 and stumbled upon these mystical writings. They couldn't have been more foreign from my experience of faith but there was something in them that called to me. I think it was the depth of certainty that surrounded her convictions. She wasn't trying to make an argument about God. She simply saw something of God's glory and it transformed

¹ Gloria Durka, *Praying with Julian of Norwich, Companions for the Journey*, (Winona, Minnesota: Saint Mary's Press Christian Brothers Publications, 1989), 15.

her. As she recounts that vision she inspires those who hear it to share in her experience. It's the difference between sitting in the sun and feeling the warmth of its light and reading a scientific formula that describes in a technical way where light comes from and how it creates heat.

Elisha for some time has known (when we come to this passage in 2 Kings) that he will continue the prophetic ministry of his teacher. Elijah had already given his mantle of authority to Elisha. They had walked together for quite some time and as a disciple Elisha had soaked in the teaching and authority of his master. What we read in 2 Kings today was the mystical moment when Elisha received the clarity and the confidence to trust all that had been provided to him.

It's an interesting request that Elisha makes to inherit a double share of Elijah's spirit. Strange because by asking for a double share it sounds as if we are talking about something that is quantifiable, when what he is requesting in Hebrew is *ruah* – spirit, breath. One theologian described it as a request for the “force of vitality, energy, and authority of Elijah”². This is not something you can divide up. His request is for a double share in the spirit of *Elijah* and what shows up in the vision is the Spirit of *God*. The whirlwind is a symbol for the vastness and power of the Creator. If Elisha was looking for some clarity and courage it showed up in spades in this mystical moment that marked the end of one ministry and the beginning of another.

The mystical moment on the mountaintop in Mark, in many ways, provides for the disciples the very same request Elisha made. Mark locates this story at the halfway mark in his gospel. Jesus has just moved through a season of teaching with his disciples (some of which we will actually read in the coming weeks as Lent begins). Part of that teaching has included the inevitability of the cross. Jesus' teaching about the inclusive nature of God's love, his insistence on the just treatment of all God's people especially the most vulnerable, and his commitment to speaking the truth despite its inconvenience and offense to the rich and powerful will make him an

² From Brueggemann, Walter. *First and Second Kings, Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary* (Macon, Georgia: Smyth & Helwys Publishing, 2000), 295.

enemy of the state. He will act out of that same love even before the face of violence and brutality and that will result in his death. This is what he has been teaching. Go back and re-read chapter 8. Peter does not want to hear of it. It does not make sense to his rational mind. How can Jesus talk (chapter 9 verse 1) about the kingdom of God which has come with power if that kingdom and that power cannot prevent the suffering and death of Jesus.

At that critical moment of questioning, a mysterious vision unfolds before their eyes up on a mountain where they have gone to pray. In that vision they are inundated with symbols from the Old Testament of God's power and presence. The cloud that covers them and the light emanating from Jesus evoke their memory of the pillar of cloud and pillar of fire that accompanied God's people after the Exodus.³ If those symbols were in some way ambiguous, Elijah and Moses appear. This is where Peter wants to stay: swept up in this mystical vision of God's glory surrounded by this power of God and sitting at the feet of these sages of old. No more talk of suffering and death. Then the vision includes a direct command from God "This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!" Then they go back down the mountain and Jesus reiterates exactly what he had been teaching before.

Mystical moments like this are rare – precious – but dangerous too. It is hinted at in this passage from Mark: the danger to become more enamored with the experience than the message. Mysticism in every religious tradition has the potential to serve the mission of the faith by drawing people to engage their faith *in* life or to tempt people to retreat *from* life in order to pursue the next mystical moment. Elisha, fueled by his vision of the whirlwind and the chariots of fire, takes up the mantle and continues the prophetic ministry of Elijah. The disciples come down from the mountain and do indeed begin to listen and absorb and integrate what Jesus means by the glory and power of God. Julian of Norwich spent the rest of her life reflecting and writing about the "Showings". While that vision came in an extraordinary way, her writings about them have touched countless Christians through the ages; Christians living quite ordinary lives. Through Julian's writings, they have come to embrace the

³ Lamar Williamson, Jr., *Mark, Interpretation: A Biblical Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 158.

profound love of God she experienced for themselves and to, in turn, share that love with others.

That's the value of mysticism: to transform information into knowledge; deep soulful certainty that inspires change and propels action and invites others onto that same path.

So I want to tell you about a blog post I read this week that Ann McKnight sent to me. It was written by Miki Kashtan, who is the co-founder of the Bay Area Nonviolent Communication. You'll notice as I read the story that there is no extraordinary vision here of a whirlwind – no flash of light – no voice from a cloud. But something tells me as I hear this account that a mystical moment occurred and you'll have to see if you agree.

Miki writes, "Imagine you came to a conference about reconciliation. Imagine you are gay, and you discovered that nothing on the agenda explores this dimension of human life. How would you feel, and what would you do? A dear friend just had this experience. I hope you find her story inspiring. I did.

"Her first response was isolation and depression. Sensing the group to be fairly conservative, she felt utterly alone, and quite desperate about it, to the point of almost changing her flight and going home early. She kept meditating and praying, and woke up on the third day with an entirely different orientation. She took the microphone, let everyone know that she was gay, and made herself available to talk with people about anything related to the topic that they wanted. I see this as precisely the courage of nonviolence that I have been writing about often. She combined, in this act, radical vulnerability combined with service. Despite her emotional discomfort, she didn't ask for anything, she didn't attempt to justify anything, she only made herself available. And people started coming....Over the remaining days she met with a steady stream of people who had no previous context for exploring their feelings and concerns. Instead of trying to get them to agree with her position, as so many of us are wont to do, she connected with the deepest places of caring in both of them, and found communion beyond, or underneath, attachment to position or to being right about anything. With some no words were

exchanged, only a hug, or a smile....When I shared with her how moved and touched I was by her story, she added that she didn't have a sense of having done something, more that it happened to her through grace..."⁴

Somewhere in the midst of this woman's prayers and meditation something shifted. A clarity and courage emerged that allowed her to step forward with conviction into unforeseen territory, to translate something she *knew* in her head into something she was willing to *do* with her life: a moment (in a manner of speaking) of transfiguration.

Mystical moments don't have to include visions and smoke, whirlwinds and fire. They are simply a moment of communion with God; a moment that changes us, giving us clarity and conviction, and a willingness to act on what we believe.

On this day of Transfiguration – as we enter into Lent – let it be our prayer that we come to have that kind of communion with God no matter how that communion may occur.

Amen.

⁴ Miki Kashtan, Blog post entitled: **Transcending Righteousness** found at <http://baynvc.blogspot.com/2010/06/transcending-righteousness.html>