

In Times Like These

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After six days Jesus took with him Peter, James and John the brother of James, and led them up a high mountain by themselves. There he was transfigured before them. His face shone like the sun, and his clothes became as white as the light. Just then there appeared before them Moses and Elijah, talking with Jesus. Peter said to Jesus, "Lord, it is good for us to be here. If you wish, I will put up three shelters--one for you, one for Moses and one for Elijah." While he was still speaking, a bright cloud enveloped them, and a voice from the cloud said, "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased. Listen to him!" When the disciples heard this, they fell facedown to the ground, terrified. But Jesus came and touched them. "Get up," he said. "Don't be afraid." When they looked up, they saw no one except Jesus only.

Matthew 17:1-8

The other day, I came across the following quotation:

Some time ago, according to a technique similar to that of the Gallup polls, a number of questions were put to mainly young people, for the most part students. One of them was as follows: "What is your basic reaction to life?" Sixty per cent answered with alarming definiteness: "Anxiety." How is it that so many who make no impression of being depressed or worried can give such a strange reply?

It wasn't a recent quotation. I came across it in a sermon from 70 or 80 years ago by Helmut Thielicke, a name not likely known to you. Bonhoeffer you may well know; he, of course, was a German Lutheran pastor who became a martyr because of his opposition to Adolf Hitler. Helmut Thielicke was also a German Lutheran pastor, from the same period, who *didn't* die – though he was subjected to constant interrogations by the Gestapo, travel and speaking bans and so on. As the darkness of the Third Reich descended on Germany, he managed to remain outside prison, speaking against Hitler and serving and supporting and encouraging a congregation of terrified people – people whose sons went to war and never returned; people who suffered the horror of the Hitler experience; people who then went through the Allied bombings of their village and homes and businesses with no guarantee that they would see the next morning. What would you preach in such a situation?

The quotation was the opening words of Thielicke's sermon titled "I Am Not Alone with My Anxiety," found in a small book of his sermons from that period titled *The Silence of God*. The book was given to me many decades ago by the pastor who confirmed me and then, years later, ordained me to the ministry, Roger Veum. I owe much to him.

I started with that note just to set a bit of context and perspective this morning. Anxiety? Many of us are facing a fair amount of it with the news filled with talk of coronavirus, a 28% stock market decline, and then the daily stomach churn of the presidential race. So, as we find ourselves facing such challenging times – I began with that note just to remind us that others

have been here before us, with perhaps far more reason to be anxious. God brought them through, and they have left a record and a witness for us to reflect upon.

If you are anxious, know that you are not alone. Perhaps it takes “times like these” to shake me out of a fairly comfortable armchair faith in Christ – to get me to take a deep breath – and to lead me to examine more closely the claims and promises he has made. Perhaps it takes “times like these” to remind us that we are connected by those claims and promises to other brothers and sisters in Christ not only throughout this valley, and throughout the world, but also to brothers and sisters in Christ down through history – folks who have “been there, done that” before us, and whom God brought through the storm.

Jesus’ disciples were anxious – especially the *leaders* of that motley group, Peter James and John. So Jesus takes those three aside and up the mountain for what we might consider a mountain top “leadership retreat.” What do we make of this gripping scene? We read that Jesus “was transfigured before them. His face shone like the sun, and his clothes became as white as the light.” And then suddenly Moses and Elijah appear in conversation with him – Elijah who had lived 800 years or so before Jesus, and Moses perhaps another 500 before that.

What was that conversation about? Had they come to strengthen and encourage Jesus? Matthew doesn’t tell us, though Luke (9:31) says “They spoke about his departure, which he was about to bring to fulfillment at Jerusalem.”

Peter is stunned. Our text says “he didn’t know what to say.” I suppose that’s a good time to remain silent – though I have seldom lived by that wisdom, and Peter didn’t either at this point. He suggests building some shelters – actually, the word is “tabernacles,” small places of worship – one for each of these figures, Jesus, Moses and Elijah. But even before he can get the words out of his mouth there is this voice from heaven, “This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased. Listen to him!” They had heard that voice – those words – before. At Jesus’ baptism, another critical time of making clear just who Jesus was and is.

And then, when they look up, Moses and Elijah have faded from view and all they see is “Jesus only.” Well, we usually have a leadership retreat each year, but we’ve never had one – at least as far as I know – with this kind of impact.

What was the point of this dramatic event? On one level, it was very simple. In Jesus day, there wasn’t yet a New Testament, of course, and they were still just talking about which books belonged in the Old Testament or “old covenant” – the words “testament” and “covenant” being the same in Greek and Hebrew. Folks agreed about the first two sections – the books of the law and the books of the prophets. Jesus often mentions “the law and the prophets” which, at that time, basically meant “the Bible” of their day.

The law had come through Moses on Mt Sinai and Elijah was a major player among the prophets. So Moses and Elijah represent the law and the prophets – basically the authority of scripture as they knew it at that time. But, of course, the prophet Jeremiah had spoken of a new day when God would establish a “new covenant.” Thus, when Jesus appears with Moses and Elijah, bright as sunlight, and then the two figures representing the “old covenant” fade away leaving “Jesus only” – well, that was a pretty clear statement that the new day had come, along with that “new covenant” Jeremiah had prophesied.

But there’s more than just that. This dazzling event was also set up to speak to the disciples’ anxiety. To understand, we need to step back and see what frames this event ... what’s

happening around it. You see, it's at this time that Jesus begins to tell the disciples about the cross that lies ahead. Oh, they were good with the idea of Jesus as this wandering rabbi and teacher. Some of them even saw him filling the role of Messiah as *they* understood that word: one who would organize a revolution, throw out the Romans, and then reestablish the throne and kingdom of David – at which point they would likely get in on the ground floor as high powered political appointees, don't you know.

But the idea of a cross ... well, that just didn't fit so well with those expectations. Just like we will be disappointed if we expect our following Jesus to lead to guaranteed riches and a life free from stress and ... may I say anxiety? That isn't what we have been promised. We have been promised much – God's presence with us every step of the way through the challenges of life, and his being there to receive us when we reach the end of that path. But a rose garden has never been part of the picture.

So just before the Transfiguration, Jesus tells them about the cross, at which point Peter responds sharply, "Never, Lord! This shall never happen to you!" ... to which Jesus responds, equally sharply, "Get behind me, Satan! You are a hindrance to me; for you are not on the side of God, but of men." "Wow," Peter must have thought, "*that* didn't work out so well."

And then, right after the Transfiguration, we read of the second time Jesus tries to tell them that "The Son of man is to be delivered into the hands of men, and they will kill him, and he will be raised on the third day." At that point we read that "they were greatly distressed." Anxiety was building. The future was starting to shape up in disturbing ways for the disciples – ways they hadn't signed on for – and so, right between these two announcements of the approaching cross, Jesus takes his leaders up the mountain for what I'm calling his "leadership retreat" – in which they get a brief but bracing image not of the humble rabbi Jesus but of the cosmic Christ; the Christ through whom, we are told, the very universe was created; the Christ of the New Covenant who was going to fulfill the law and the prophets. It took some time for them to understand, but so striking was this new image that, once they caught it, it stayed with them for the rest of their lives. In our second lesson, an older Peter reflects back on that moment when he writes

we were eyewitnesses of his majesty. He received honor and glory from God the Father when the voice came to him from the Majestic Glory, saying, "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased."

So right between these two announcements of the cross—to bring strength in the face of the disciples' anxiety – Jesus is transfigured before Peter, James and John in a way that said to them – and says to us – this Jesus whom you follow is a much bigger deal than you may realize. So many popular images of Jesus, inviting as they might be – Jesus the good shepherd carrying the lost lamb, Jesus with the little children, and so on – these warm and popular images can fall short of making clear that this Jesus is God in the flesh, the second person of the Trinity, the one who calmed the stormy sea with a word, and one into whose hands we can entrust our very lives even in times like these. *Especially* in times like these.

God's word to you today, my friend, is the same as it was to the disciples when God spoke to them from heaven and said, "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased. Listen to him!" And, when all was said and done, those ancient figures of Moses and Elijah, who so

occupied the forefront of the disciples' attention, receded from view and they found their eyes fixed on "Jesus only."

Today, we may also need to have our attention refocused and our gaze redirected – not from Moses and Elijah but rather from what can become a morbid fixation upon things beyond our control – whether matters of health or economy or politics. Not a "Jesus only" escapism, but a reminder and a recognition of "Jesus only" as our one true and reliable foundation and gravitational center. For many of us this won't be either the first time or the last time when we, in the midst of a challenge or crisis, need to be told to take a deep breath, step back, and remember just who we are and who this water-to-wine-changing, storm-calming, raiser-from-the-dead figure of Jesus really is: the Son of the living God.

Others have certainly refocused their attention like this in the midst of crisis – from the disciples themselves to Paul to Luther to figures such as Helmut Thielicke and those to whom he preached in war torn Germany. In the midst of the most major storms of history – in which their lives were physically threatened – they cast their anchors into the person and promises of Christ and found them to hold secure.

But it was not the Mount of Transfiguration itself that made this possible. The day finally came when Jesus' troubling predictions to the disciples became reality. Again a mount – though this time not the Mount of Transfiguration but rather a mount called Calvary. Again, Jesus is central – only this time there would be no encouraging voice from the heavens – no voice at all from above – just the voice of desolation which cried *to* the heavens from the cross: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me." A voice that was met by silence – that dark silence which Helmut Thielicke called "The Silence of God."

Oh, we know that wasn't the end. Praise God we can know that that wasn't the end. We are at present traveling a Lenten trajectory that *arrives* at that glad end – the marvelous victory of Easter – but we aren't there yet. Nor are we yet at the end of the anxious trajectory of our present national health and economic journey. But it is just for folks like us, living in times like these, that the startling image of the Transfiguration was put in place – between those two predictions of the cross – put there to remind the disciples, and us, of just who this Jesus is – and of how we can trust our lives, and the lives of those we love, into his hands.

Yes, my friends, you and I *are* in good hands today, come what may. I can't emphasize that enough. That's not a promise of insulation from life's trials – certainly the disciples themselves didn't receive that nor, as their faith and understanding matured, did they expect it. Rather, you are promised God's strong presence with you through whatever shape the coming weeks and months may take for you. And, whatever patterns our gathering and worship and ministries and mutual support take in the weeks ahead – patterns that may shift and change – God has also given us that continued support and encouragement of one another ... certainly in praying for one another, perhaps through checking in by phone calls, and in reminding one another that we are not the first of God's people down through history to go through seriously challenging times while securely in the grip of his care.

And it's because of that conviction that we, like the disciples, can now return from the strong affirmation of the Mount of Transfiguration, back down to the challenges of the plains and valleys of daily life – which now await us and for which we are well prepared. You see, it is precisely "times like these" that present new chances for us as God's people to *be* God's people. What presents itself as a crisis or obstacle is often used by God as an opportunity – if only we,

his people, are listening. You may well have a sense of calm and peace that others lack ... and need to hear about from you. You need to tend to the basics, of course, especially if you have a family that depends upon you; but once you've taken those necessary steps – what's going on with your neighbors? If the guy behind you in line looks flustered and anxious, perhaps give him your place in line ... and then offer a word of encouragement to the harassed checkout clerk. You didn't plan the beginning of your life, and you can't control its end, but as a confident follower of Jesus you can certainly make a difference in the middle – for others – in his name.

I began with the opening words from a sermon by Helmut Thielicke titled “I Am Not Alone with My Anxiety.” Let me finish with his final words at the end of that sermon. Speaking to his stressed out German congregation, he closed by saying:

This is no longer a mist-covered landscape into which I peer anxiously because of the sinister events which will there befall me. Everything is now different. We do not know what will come. But we know who will come. And if the last hour belongs to us, we do not need to fear the next minute.

Let us pray...