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Deep Calls unto Deep
(Learning to Be Present)
Luke 9:28-36

How do you talk about something so spiritually intimate and personal that it was kept silent for years? That is our assignment for this morning's text: "And they kept silent and in those days told no one any of the things they had seen."

Today's story from Luke is loaded with images and icons—a mountaintop experience, the changed face of Jesus, dazzling white clothes, the appearance of two prophets, sleeping disciples, postponed construction projects, a voice out of a cloud, an experience so powerful that honored only silence, and pandemonium below in a crowd that doesn't know how to help a boy who is having a seizure.

Raphael's artistic masterpiece, *The Transfiguration*, presents a chaotic scene at the bottom of the canvas. Stuck at the foot of the mountain, the disciples cannot cure the sick boy. Frustration is palpable in the outstretched arms and panicked faces of the crowd. In their midst, two figures point in the direction of the mountain, toward the sky, in which the transfigured Jesus shines, arrayed in white. This is the Jesus who will come down the mountain, bringing life and healing to the boy.

Another important correlation is Luke's story of the Transfiguration juxtaposed with the image of Moses returning from Mount Sinai. Both Jesus and Moses are described as having changed faces with other people being conscious of the divine element of this encounter.

Our temptation, I think, is getting sidetracked by all the details and missing the larger theme of both Luke's story and the Exodus story of Moses (Exodus 34:29-35). The four gospels repeatedly describe Jesus pulling away to himself to draw close to the source of his power and wisdom. In this story of the Transfiguration, Peter had the same problem that most of us have—difficulty being inwardly still long enough to experience the holy around us.

Part of our difficulty with silence and contemplation is the fear of change. As long as we keep our minds filled with the things we already know, associate with people we are comfortable being around, don't have to consider religious or political positions that differ from our accustomed ways...we remain comfortable. It is when we move out of our comfort zone that we are challenged, and all too often we don't like feeling that kind of challenge. Silence and contemplation invite deeper insight; and, insight into ourselves (our thoughts and feelings) prompts change. Carl Jung once said: "If you can't stand to be alone in silence with yourself, why do you inflict yourself on others?" From the earliest Christian thinkers onward, tradition has insisted that faith, rightly understood, is a quest to know oneself in God. To run from the self is to run from God.

On one occasion, Jesus entered the village of Bethany and the home of Martha and Mary. Mary sat at Jesus' feet to listen to what he had to say. But Martha was distracted by her many tasks. Annoyed, she came to Jesus and asked, "Lord, doesn't it bother you that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her to help me." But, Jesus said to her, "Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; there is need of only one thing. Indeed, only one thing, which is to be present to the moment." (Luke 10:38-42)

Martha was doing the reasonable, hospitable thing—the one expected of her gender. Martha was everything good and right, but one thing she was not. She was not *present*. Most likely, she was not present to herself, her own feelings of resentment, perhaps her own martyr complex, her need to be needed. This is the kind of good, Father Richard Rohr says, that does no good. If she was not present to herself, she could not truly be present to her guests in any healing way. Neither could she be present to God. "Presence is presence is presence," Rohr says. "How you do it is how you do everything."¹

How is your spiritual life going? What is making a difference at this point in your life, spiritually? Everyday is filled with something new to enrich your life. Are you paying attention? Are you hearing the sounds? Seeing the colors? While it's brought its downside, our world has teetered on the edge of a winter wonderland for the past three weeks. The migrating ducks have temporarily

¹ Richard Rohr, *The Naked Now* (New York, The Crossroad Publishing Company: 2009), p.58.

moved further south. Snow birds have been in the mix on our feeder. My Friday friend is a wren who comes to peer in our upstairs office window at home as I am finishing my sermon. The eyes of children and grandchildren are filled with wonder. Their minds are loaded with questions we need to ponder ourselves.

*Earth's crammed with heaven,
And every common bush afire with God.
And only he who sees takes off his shoes,
The rest sit around and pluck blackberries.*

—Elizabeth Barrett Browning from *Aurora Leigh*, Book vii

So, where do you start by being more present? Right where you are. For Peter and his anxiety over the unique encounter in the silence on Mount Tabor, it was to pay attention to the cloud that moved in on them and what he perceived as a voice telling him, “Pay attention. This is my Son. Listen to him.” And the sound of that silence was so powerful that it was held in confidence by John, James, and him for some time. Yet, it was part of his movement from commercial fishing, to disciple, to betrayer, to heading the church of Jerusalem.

Who do you remember teaching you reverence in your early life? My dad was that person for me. The way he could gently remove a splinter from a finger was an art. I’ve watched him admire the grain of wood in quarter-sawn oak, call my attention to a young cat stalking a bird on a feeder, sit frozen for minutes-on-end listening to the faint sound of deer as their feeding brought them over the ridge near us.

So, where do you begin your practice of being present? Right where you are. Right now. Being present—being fully alive to the holiness of life all around you—is the one thing necessary. “...you cannot get there by trying harder. This is a difficult lesson for most people, which is probably why Jesus called it the ‘narrow path that few would walk upon,’” Rohr reminds us. Much of religion involves teaching people this and that, an accumulation of facts and affirmations that is suppose to add up to a devout life. The great teachers tell us that one major change is needed: *how we do the moment*. Then, most everything else will fall into place.

Sure, we make our mistakes. Look at Jacob. He deceived his brother and his father to get the family inheritance, only to run for his life leaving the

inheritance behind. On the road as a refugee, he used a stone for a pillar in the middle of the desert. It was in the silence of that barren setting that Jacob encountered angels in a dream ministering to him. More mistakes, more deceptions over the years, until Jacob finally wrestles with the stranger in the dark, who is himself and God. Yet, through this quest to be fully present before life, Jacob stands as one of the fathers of our faith.

We begin right where we are by being more present to our own feelings, our emptiness, our elation, the feelings and presence of others sitting near by, the flirt of a small child's smile, a line of scripture, a refrain of a song, the invitation felt in another's prayer.

If you're thinking that doing more will open the lines of communication between you and God, think again. Be still right where you are. Open your eyes wide. In all the good and in all the bad the presence of the holy is before you. "Deep calls unto deep," the Psalmist says. And, Isaiah's wisdom is our needed watchword:

Though the Lord may give you the bread of adversity and the water of affliction, yet your Teacher will not hide himself any more, but your eyes shall see your Teacher. And when you turn to the right or when you turn to the left, your ears shall hear a word behind you, saying, 'This is the way; walk in it.' (Isaiah 30:2-21)

Let your mind, body, and spirit hear the words, "This is the way; walk in it."

AMEN.

Exodus 34:29-35

29Moses came down from Mount Sinai. As he came down from the mountain with the two tablets of the covenant in his hand, Moses did not know that the skin of his face shone because he had been talking with God. 30When Aaron and all the Israelites saw Moses, the skin of his face was shining, and they were afraid to come near him. 31But Moses called to them; and Aaron and all the leaders of the congregation returned to him, and Moses spoke with them. 32Afterward all the Israelites came near, and he gave them in commandment all that the LORD had spoken with him on Mount Sinai. 33When Moses had finished speaking with them, he put a veil on his face; 34but whenever Moses went in before the LORD to speak with him, he would take the veil off, until he came out; and when he came out, and told the Israelites what he had been commanded, 35the Israelites would see the face of Moses, that the skin of his face was shining; and Moses would put the veil on his face again, until he went in to speak with him.

Luke 9:28-36 (37-43)

28Now about eight days after these sayings Jesus took with him Peter and John and James, and went up on the mountain to pray. 29And while he was praying, the appearance of his face changed, and his clothes became dazzling white. 30Suddenly they saw two men, Moses and Elijah, talking to him. 31They appeared in glory and were speaking of his departure, which he was about to accomplish at Jerusalem. 32Now Peter and his companions were weighed down with sleep; but since they had stayed awake, they saw his glory and the two men who stood with him. 33Just as they were leaving him, Peter said to Jesus, "Master, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah" — not knowing what he said. 34While he was saying this, a cloud came and overshadowed them; and they were terrified as they entered the cloud. 35Then from the cloud came a voice that said, "This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!" 36When the voice had spoken, Jesus was found alone. And they kept silent and in those days told no one any of the things they had seen.

37On the next day, when they had come down from the mountain, a great crowd met him. 38Just then a man from the crowd shouted, "Teacher, I beg you to look at my son; he is my only child. 39Suddenly a spirit seizes him, and all at once he shrieks. It convulses him until he foams at the mouth; it mauls him and will scarcely leave him. 40I begged your disciples to cast it out, but they could not." 41Jesus answered, "You faithless and perverse generation, how much longer must I be with you and bear with you? Bring your son here." 42While he was coming, the demon dashed him to the ground in convulsions. But Jesus rebuked the unclean spirit, healed the boy, and gave him back to his father. 43And all were astounded at the greatness of God.