

“Tell it Slant”

As we discussed earlier this Epiphany, the readings for the season between Christmastide and Ash Wednesday are all about how Jesus is revealed to the world. The revelation might be to a large group of people, or just a few. The first revelation in the Gospel of Matthew is to the Magi who come to visit the toddler Jesus in Bethlehem. Unfortunately, that revelation also includes the revelation to King Herod that a child born in Bethlehem might be one who will challenge his kingship. After being warned in a dream that Herod is coming for them, The Holy Family flees to Egypt. Later in another dream they learn it is safe to return to Israel. But rather than returning to Bethlehem they settle in Nazareth. A little village far away from Jerusalem and the seat of power.

The other revelations we have heard about over the past seven weeks are the revelation to John the Baptizer’s disciples when he points out Jesus as the Lamb of God; the revelation to the fisherman when he calls them to be his disciples; the revelation through the Beatitudes; his preaching that he has not come to abolish but to fulfill the Hebrew Scriptures; and his revelation as he calls for the spirit rather than the letter of the Law. Today’s revelation is altogether different.

In this instance, Jesus takes his three most trusted disciples—Peter, James and John—and heads up a mountain. As with the Sermon on the Mount we are supposed to be reminded of Moses and his mountaintop revelations. We might also remember the great prophet Elijah and his mountaintop experiences. Once up the mountain without so much as a “How do you do?” Jesus is transfigured. That is, according to Merriam Webster he is “transformed into something more beautiful or elevated.” In this case, his garments become blazing white and his face shines like the sun. The three disciples are dazzled.

Then something even more stunning happens. Jesus is joined on the mountaintop by Moses and Elijah—the two greatest prophets in Judaism. It is unclear how the disciples could know who these two men were. Elijah was drawn up into heaven almost nine hundred years prior, and Moses had been dead much longer. But somehow the disciples discern that Jesus is having a confab with these two great men.

James and John seem to be dumbstruck. Peter on the other hand seems to never be at a loss for words. He is not dumbstruck just dumb. He starts to jabber some foolishness to Jesus while Jesus is in the midst of this conversation with the prophets. Peter wants to build three dwellings to honor the event. That is actually not a bad idea. The ancient Jews often built altars, cairns, or booths to mark something momentous. But on the whole it seems a rather inadequate response to what is happening.

As if to cut off Peter before he says anything else, a voice booms from heaven, “This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!” This theophany is almost identical to what Jesus heard when he rose from the water after his baptism. The big difference is that instead of being addressed to Jesus it is addressed to his disciples. If the revelation is not enough, there is the emphatic ending “Listen to him.” At that point they are overcome by fear and collapse on the ground just as in the Bellini painting I passed around. But Jesus being Jesus assures them with a gentle touch that all is well and tells them not to be afraid.

Subsequently, as they head down the mountain they must have been either in stunned silence or whispering among themselves about what had just happened. Matthew does not say. He does tell us that Jesus commands them not to tell anyone about what they had seen. But he adds a caveat which must have furthered their

confusion and amazement. For he says they are not to tell anyone “...until after the Son of Man is raised from the dead.” He had previously revealed that he would be killed and raised from the dead, but the disciples were confused by that. His additional prediction after the transfiguration must have added to the mystery.

That is all well and good you might say, but what are we in the 21st century supposed to do with such stories? I wonder if it is possible for us in our post—modern. Post—Enlightenment skepticism to accept that something like this could happen, or does it seem like a fairytale or a myth? We seem to have a hard enough time believing that someone could be raised from the dead. What do we think of long dead people coming back to speak to the living, and voices booming from heaven with words of revelation and instruction? People in ancient times were also skeptical. In the Letter from Peter we heard earlier. He writes, “We did not follow cleverly devised myths when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we had been eyewitnesses of his majesty. For he received honor and glory from God the Father when that voice was conveyed to him by the Majestic Glory, saying, ‘This is my Son, my Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.’ We ourselves heard this voice come from heaven, while we were with him on the holy mountain.” Even firsthand testimony seems to be suspect.

This may be why Jesus was always telling his disciples and the people he healed to keep miracles a secret. To paraphrase a famous movie, “The people can’t handle the truth.” It is sad, but true, particularly when it is outside of our ken. So Jesus was onto something. Emily Dickenson dealt with this problem when she wrote, “Tell all the Truth but tell it slant.” That is, come at the truth from the side, on a tangent or circularly. Build up to it in such a way that by the time you get to its center it no longer seems implausible.

Children in Catechesis of the Good Shepherd learn about Jesus as a person along with his parables long before they are exposed to his miracles. That may be what we all need to do. Understand who Jesus is before we try to grasp the miracles. Then when we learn about the miracles, the Transfiguration, the Resurrection and the Ascension we do not have to try to wrap our scientific matter-of-fact brains around them. We can accept what we know about Jesus to be true, and then live in the wonder about those things that are too extraordinary to be possible. Matthew, Mark, Luke and John and scads of ordinary disciples knew the miracles to be true. They bet their lives on them. We can too, with a little slanted help.

So tell all of the truth but tell it slant, because it must dazzle gradually or every one of us would be blinded by it or to it.

Tell all the Truth but tell it slant —
Success in Circuit lies;
Too bright for mind's infirm intent,
The Truth's superb surprise.
As Lightning to the Children eased,
With explanation kind;
The Truth must dazzle gradually,
Or every man be blind.¹

¹ Poem 1263—*The Poems of Emily Dickinson: Reading Edition* (The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1998)