

In the Mystery
A Sermon for Sardis Baptist Church
Luke 9:28-36
February 7, 2014

In the past two decades, Hollywood has helped Americans put a face on God: Morgan Freeman and Alanis Morissette have both reprised the role. And really good choices, I might add! In Freeman, we meet a God who is cool – he looks really sharp in his white tuxedo, and has a commanding voice. In Morissette, we meet a God who is silly – she wears a sundress and loves to do somersaults. But long before God made Bruce and Evan Almighty, and long before God smiled her smile of forgiveness on a fallen, but penitent Ben Affleck, another actor made God famous: George Burns in the *Oh God!* movies. In the 1970s and 1980s, Americans pictured God as a cigar-smoking, bespectacled, gravelly-voiced eighty-something.

In each of these movies, a series of characters encounter theophany – that is, they actually see God in a tangible way. But each encounter is fleeting. One moment, George Burns is sitting on a park bench offering advice or counsel, the next he’s coming through the TV on the *Tonight Show*, and then the next, God is gone. Poof! As each story develops, the protagonists cling to the theophany experience, but in so doing, they encounter resistance from a world not yet ready to believe what seems too outrageous to be true.

In one scene, God delivers a little girl named Tracey back to her parents. Tracey has run away because everyone thinks she’s delusional – she keeps insisting God is right beside her. God meets Tracey at the train station, and convinces her to come back home to her parents. God says they’ll get there quick. The next thing you know, God and Tracey are on a white motorcycle, the old-fashioned kind, with a passenger compartment on the side. God is decked out in a white scarf,

goggles, and white helmet. The motorcycle is hauling – and I mean hauling – It’s going 100 MPH down the streets of LA, and as it does, it flies by two policemen. At that moment, the camera pans to a new shot. The motorcycle is moving, Tracey is in the passenger side, but there appears to be no driver! God is invisible to the policemen.

One cop says to the other, “Did you see that?” The other cop says, “A motorcycle with no driver? Yes, that’s what I saw, but there’s no way we’re calling it in! Who would believe us?”

God is a mystery. A big mystery. And that mystery is both frustrating and wonderful at the same time. Frustrating, because how do we explain this mystery? What’s the science behind a God who appears in a burning bush or fiery cloud? Where’s the proof of all these theophanies? Got a selfie? Got a certificate? Got more than one eye-witness? But then again, the mystery of God is wonderful. Aren’t we glad that God’s whole being: God’s actions, God’s abilities, God’s character – aren’t we glad that none of this is limited to our small sense of comprehension, or even our sense of imagination?

God is a mystery. Ugh! God is a mystery. Hooray! This is the tension of today’s text.

Jesus transfigures. Huh?

As our story begins, Peter, James, and John have been following their new teacher Jesus. Jesus has been busy: he’s been teaching and healing and performing miracles. But the three disciples don’t quite yet grasp who is in their midst. Perhaps it’s all still too surreal – it isn’t every day you are in the presence of someone who can feed five thousand people with five loaves, or who can compel stern Centurions to faith. Or perhaps the disciples have seen too much too soon –

perhaps the extraordinary has happened so frequently, it now seems expected. “Oh yeah, Jesus, he always does that.”

Regardless of the reason, the disciples still do not comprehend Jesus’ true purpose. One day, Jesus, Peter, John, and James ascend a mountain to pray. This is not a short activity. Jesus prays with his whole being – this is a long, long period of discernment. It’s exhausting. The disciples are feeling the effects of exhaustion when they notice that Jesus, while praying, is beginning to take on a strange glow. His face and clothes take on a “dazzling white.” It is a transfiguration – his whole appearance changes.

To the modern reader, this is a really strange phenomenon. But this white glow would not be unheard of in ancient Israel. In the Old Testament, each time Moses encountered God in the Tabernacle, he too would take on this strange glow. Immediately, the text is telling us that some sort of divine encounter is about to happen.

Next thing you know, Moses and Elijah appear, and begin having a conversation with Jesus. These two figures represent the Mt. Rushmore of Judaism: Moses is a representation of the law, and Elijah is considered the greatest prophet.

The text reveals the subject of Jesus’ prayer. Jesus is going up the mountain to pray about his impending journey to Jerusalem. Upon the conclusion of his Galilean ministry, he will go to Jerusalem, and certain death. Moses and Elijah provide counsel.

Peter and the other disciples watch on in awe. They realize who they are in the presence of. This is a significant moment. And they want to document it, cling to it, hold onto it. Peter asks Jesus if he can build three dwellings, one for each great prophet. Peter’s gesture is sincere. In building these dwellings, Peter and the others will create a

permanent marker of the event – this place will hold the same significance as the stones at Bethel, the place where Jacob wrestled God, or as the stones at Gilgal, where Joshua crossed the Jordan into Canaan.

But before Peter can finish asking his question, he and Jesus, and the other disciples are covered in a thick cloud. We're not told what kind of cloud, but I tend to think it's a thundercloud. In a matter of seconds, this cloud swells around them, the winds pick up, there's a quick, steady drop in temperature and the cloud is so thick, the disciples can't see more than six inches in front of them. It's unsettling at first. And very quickly, uneasiness turns to terror. "What is happening? Our friend has literally transfigured, and now the earth is changing before us!"

And in the midst of this chaotic cloud, the disciples hear God's calming voice: "This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!"

And all at once, the world is calm again. The cloud dissipates, and Jesus is alone. And the disciples keep silent.

Too often, I think we dismiss the transfiguration story because it's too unbelievable, too weird, too far from our center of understanding. The intellectual side of us says, "No thanks, we'll stick to the rational."

Dismissing this story for its strangeness is a mistake. The power of this story is not in its telling of a strange, unexplainable event. The Jesus story is significant with or without a transfiguration. The significance of this story is in the way God makes things known to God's people.

God, and God's possibilities, are not something to be captured, to be documented, or to be proven. When Peter and the disciples see these miraculous events, their first response is to take notes, to make a

marker of what has happened, to capture this moment in a vacuum. But in their rush to document the actual moment of God's presence, the disciples fail to experience God's real presence.

The disciples are like parents who never actually see their child's ballet performance because they're too busy looking at it on their camcorder, or Super Bowl Fans who attend the game, but spend the whole time live-tweeting the experience. The disciples were present, but they weren't present to the moment.

God shakes the disciples into presence. In these actions God says to the disciples, "This event is not a spectacle, this is a chance for you to hear some very clear instructions: Jesus is my son. Listen to him!"

And just like that, the moment was over. No more provable than the fish that was "this big!!!" but no less meaningful than the experience of catching it.

The disciples were slow learners. When Jesus was among them, they were content to be bystanders – to simply tell the story of the One they followed, to simply let Jesus do the work. But eventually, the disciples became more than bystanders. They stopped believing that the work and ministry of Jesus was some distant, unobtainable memory. And eventually, they began to realize, that like Jesus, they too could channel God's possibilities. In Acts, the continuation of Luke's gospel, we see ordinary disciples doing extraordinary things.

Friends, God acts in mysterious ways. And sometimes God appears in extraordinary ways: cloaked in dazzling white; or in a fiery flame; or as an angel visiting Mary; or as an old man with a cigar and a really cool motorcycle. But odds are, our own personal theophanies will be much more ordinary: a calming presence in crisis; a child laughing; a timely

note; a chorus that sounds so good you wish it would never end; a sun that peaks out from hidden cloud, a table with saltines and grape juice.

Whether extraordinary or ordinary, moments of God's real presence are fleeting. We cannot waste our time trying aimlessly to still them. Instead, we must be alert, attentive, ready to embrace these moments for all they are worth – for in these moments, we will hear God's voice. And in these ordinary moments, we will realize an extraordinary truth: our God is so big, and so mysterious, and so wonderful, that no possibility is beyond God's reach. And just like Jesus, and just like the disciples, we too can channel the possibilities God has for us.

May it always be so! Amen.