

Drenched In Light

Since it is Super Bowl Sunday, indulge me in a little walk down memory lane, will you?

Picture it: Minneapolis. The year was 2018.

The reigning Super Bowl champions, the New England Patriots, fresh of a 13-3 AFC best season, came to town led by their MVP quarterback, Tom Brady. (Try to resist booing during the sermon.)

Though our heroes, the Philadelphia Eagles, had also finished with a 13-3 NFC best season, they came to town as underdogs following the late-season injury of Carson Wentz, under the leadership of their backup quarterback, Nick Foles. (Try to resist cheering.)

With a trick play, the Philly Special (also remembered as the Philly-Philly) in which Jason Kelce snapped the ball to Corey Clement, who pitched it to Trey Burton, who passed it to the wide-open Nick Foles, they won the game, making Foles the first player to both throw and catch the game-winning touchdown.

This slick move, folks, is winning *with style*.

Though I was not yet your pastor, like the entire rest of the country outside of New England, I was pulling for an Iggles upset. And, despite the well-placed admonition from Saturday Night Live not to burn down our city or punch a police horse, despite the well-greased light poles, I have it on good authority that the best word to describe our fair city following the win was *pandemonium*.

Furthermore, the schools, courts, and city shut down for the parade that took place the following Thursday, featuring the now-legendary speech by center Jason Kelce, dressed in a complete mummies' costume.

It was a uniting, defining experience for our city.

Unsurprisingly, the language used to describe it bordered on *religious experience*.

The phrase *religious experience* is, of course, common slang.

The term is bandied about to describe sports wins, political conventions, any moment when a common experience interrupts and disrupts ordinary expectations.

True religious experiences, however, perhaps run a bit deeper?

A religious experience can be a profound reconsideration of what we have hitherto expected.

A religious experience can be an intrusion of *joy* when perhaps depression or even sadness has been on tap thus far.

A religious experience can be the interference of *awe* in an otherwise blasé moment.

Truly religious experiences oftentimes manifest as the revelation of the *holy* in the midst of the ordinary.

Many of us, if we have had such experiences, are a bit reticent to share about them.

Perhaps we are concerned that if we do so too earnestly, we will be seen as religious nutjobs. To interject an experience of profound otherness into everyday conversation might cause people to believe that we have taken leave of our senses, perhaps because the experience itself is so fleeting, so ethereal that the language we are given to describe it fails us.

Or perhaps our reticence arises from the reality that our experience of the holy might be perceived by others as nothing more than ordinary coincidence.

I have never forgotten a moment, in my late twenties, when on a cold, slushy day in February in Paris, I entered the cathedral of Notre Dame.

On a prior trip to France, in my early twenties, I had been pleasantly surprised to find that my high school French had stood me in good stead. I had crammed with a common phrase lexicon to prepare, but found to my great delight that I could still carry on basic conversations.

It was astonishing how much elasticity my brain must have lost in a mere eight years, because this time, I was reduced to *oui, non, combien d'argent, et WC*.

As I entered Notre Dame, Mass was being celebrated, and I have absolutely no idea in which language, because I didn't understand a word. It could have been French, it could have been Urdu, for all I understood.

As a minister, I would have loved to have been able to follow the liturgy. When the service ended, and the throngs dispersed, I continued to explore the Cathedral.

I walked around toward the back of the apse, the oldest part of the cathedral.

In one of the small apsidal chapels, a service appeared to be ongoing, perhaps it was church sanctioned service, perhaps not.

I still didn't understand the language, but the music united me in worship with those gathered in the chapel. It took a moment, but soon the strains of a Taize tune became clear to me, and I joined in, *Veni Sancte Spiritus, Veni Sancte Spiritus*.

It was a numinous experience.

That word, *numinous*, was shot through all of my reading on these texts: *Having a strong religious or spiritual quality, indicating or suggesting the presence of a divinity*.

Writing on our Gospel lesson, Marcan scholar Lamar Williamson observed about the transfiguration that, for all of Jesus' miraculous power, he remains deeply, intensely *human* in his appearance, but *this* passage reveals a pure transcendence, not seen anywhere else in Mark. The high mountain is the place nearest heaven, where revelation occurs. The cloud reminds us of how God moved with the Hebrews in the wilderness. The brightness of Jesus' clothes evokes the *shekinah*, the radiance of the pillar of fire with which God went before the people. Williamson concluded, "It communicates in visual and auditory terms a fleeting perception of the eternal splendor, an elusive awareness of the divine presence."¹

Furthermore, Samuel Terrien noted of this passage that Mark placed it at the center of his account of the Gospel, and importantly, *that it represented a turning point in Jesus' attitude toward himself.*

"The story closes the Galilean ministry and prepares for the journey to Jerusalem – and certain death. Was Jesus going to be a violent revolutionary as the Petrine confession may have implied? The setting of the scene of the transfiguration was in all likelihood the Feast of the Tabernacles, during which messianic fever often seized the crowds of worshippers." Terrien concludes, "In spite of its setting, the narrative does not suggest any heavenly confirmation of the messianic mission of Jesus. *On the contrary, the three phases or movements of the scene are rooted in the early Hebraic understanding of divine presence, in contrast to the later expectation of a political messiah.*"²

Elijah, like Moses, like Jesus, exemplified the *entre-nous* of humankind and God.

Far from setting Jesus apart from the common religious experience of his disciples, the transfiguration sets him alongside the presence of God revealed to God's people.

When we consider the stories of God with Moses, and God with Elijah, like the transfiguration of Jesus, these are stories *drenched in light.*

It is no doubt easy, in the frenzy of religious experience, to become caught up in the *appearance* of the event.

The light, the disruption of ordinary events, the appearance of the extraordinary – these hallmarks of religious experience, as important as they surely are – can in fact distract us from what we may learn in such moments.

In *Sowing the Gospel*, Mary Ann Tolbert notes, "The final command of the voice from the clouds, Hear him! (ἀκούετε αὐτοῦ) forces the audience to reassess the apparent point of the episode."³

¹ Lamar Williamson, *Mark in Interpretation*, Mays, Miller, and Achtemeier, eds. (JKP: Louisville, 1983) p158.

² Samuel Terrien, *The Elusive Presence: Toward a New Biblical Theology* (Harper&Row: San Francisco, 1978) p422 *emphasis mine.*

³ Mary Ann Tolbert, *Sowing the Gospel: Mark's World in Literary Historical Perspective* (Fortress: Minneapolis, 1996) p208

She further observes that in a passage that seems overwhelmingly focused on what we *see*, the command is to *listen*.

And what Jesus has been preaching, teaching, saying to his disciples, to the crowds is this: The way he is going is the way of suffering, and his followers will experience such things also.

No matter what we *see*, we must *hear* what Jesus is teaching.

And it isn't suffering for suffering's sake that Jesus is preaching, it is suffering in which faithfulness to God manifests the reign of God in the world.

You're gob-smacked by the miracles?

Great.

You're moved by the healings?

Wonderful.

You're swept along with the crowds and their fervent feeling, their religious experience?

Fine.

But don't miss the message.

Permit me one more scholarly quotation, this time from Brian Blount, who writes, "Suffering is an inevitable consequence of the Son of Man's tactical preaching, but neither a tactical nor a strategic goal of the Lord's way. The tactical goal remains what it has been throughout Mark's context of the situation thus far, the extension of the future, and transformative, kingdom into the present human circumstance. Preaching, not suffering, even on the cross, is the tactical activity that leads to it. The strategic goal, is the consummate kingdom that is prefigured in the Parousia prolepsis of the transfiguration."⁴

The numinous experience of divine revelation is not itself the point, any more than the trappings of worship are ever the point.

The point is not three figures drenched in light, but instead how they usher us to a *world* drenched in light.

The experience of the divine in the apsidal chapel of Notre Dame was *not* the words of the song, or even the notes that carried them, but what resided *between* the notes and the words: the presence of the Body of Christ that transcended language and liturgical practice.

And perhaps this is heresy, but the power of a Super Bowl victory is the way the parade brought about the breaking down of all the divisions of neighborhood, ethnicity, economic class, politics, and whatever else conspires to keep us apart.

⁴ Brian Blount, *Go Preach: Mark's Kingdom Message and the Black Church Today* (Orbis: NY, 1998) p138

One might even call it a religious experience.

A world drenched in light, that is the way that Jesus is pointing in Mark's Gospel, because faithfulness to the kingdom message of Jesus invariably leads to the breaking down of dividing walls of hostility and the breaking in of the kingdom of God.

It is frequently, and rightly, noted that in Mark's Gospel, at the moment that Jesus dies, the curtain of the temple is shredded, from top to bottom. That which separates the *holy* from everything else is swept aside, the division between the numinous and the not-so-special is gone.

And as dark as that moment is, it is also a moment pulsating with possibility.

Mark's audience knows that while we do not yet see it in this moment, God will raise Jesus from the dead.

When the women come to the empty tomb, on the other side of Lent, the darkness of the early morning will be pregnant with hope, as news of the resurrection ultimately whispers forth.

And the new world, drenched in resurrection light, becomes the world in which the entre-nous of God and Moses, God and Elijah, God and Jesus, becomes the world of the entre-nous between God and you and me.

Oh, we aren't to the empty tomb yet, Lent hasn't even begun.

We've not even come down from the mountaintop yet.

Maybe we're still up there with Peter, basking in the warm glow of reflected familiarity with the divine, not knowing the divine light is shining on us also.

No, we aren't there yet. There is still a valley to transverse.

There are still booths to build, shelters to keep us looking at a reflected glow, never realizing that we are already drenched in light.

It is not even Lent yet.

So, it is too soon to trumpet forth about resurrection possibility, isn't it?

Isn't it?

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, Amen.