

## SPEECHLESS

Texts on Transfiguration Sunday

February 14, 2010

Mark 9: 2-10

When you read the Old Testament prophets—Isaiah, Micah, Jeremiah, and more—you notice that two concerns trouble them, and only two: false worship and injustice toward the least, the *anawim*. A few of the prophets stand against both evils, but most land on one foot and not the other. Hosea fulminates against Israel's turning to foreign gods, for example, while Micah declares woe to "those who defraud a man of his home . . . because it is in their power to do it." (Micah 2: 1-2)

Now, I am a sixties-generation boomer whose conscience was forged in social justice dreams and actions from those times. Twenty years later, when I studied the prophets in seminary, I drank from those oracles that stood beneath the power of King's speeches. *Let justice flow down like mighty waters and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.* (Amos 5:24) I was eager to carry that word further. As for the other kind of oracle, I was cool to their laments against idols and foreign gods. Not one of the score of foreign gods named in the Bible is worshiped anywhere on earth today. Unlike the social justice question, these matters of foreign idols then seemed to me abstract at best, or just antique.

Through the years, a path cleared before my eyes by a light I had no eye for when I was younger, when passions had me. One text for this instruction is our own nation's history of grievous assault on some of its own people and on some other nations. This account of America's story is denied by many religious in this most religiously active nation. In the last decades, more than half of us have felt that religion warrants war and torture and discrimination against people with diseases and disabilities they cannot pay for. A recent poll from the Pew Center reveals that 77% of evangelical Protestant pastors and 58% of the rest of Protestant pastors agree with the statement, "Islam is a dangerous religion." Where can I turn in my card! Christendom is dangerous religion, hosting viruses of such ignorance and fear!

When I feel this gash of unjust violence from swords wielded by religious mouths, the words of the *other* prophets make sense. I had thought of them as two kinds, the worship and the justice prophets—but no! These are voices harmonizing one theme; they are the hands that pray and the hands that work for what is true and good. You can read the prophets' warnings forwards or backwards, just like an x-ray: 1) People who worship wrong will be unjust masters. 2) A society which ignores the wretched of the earth is not worshiping in truth. 3) If you want justice, worship truly. 4) If you worship truly, justice will flow down from you like mighty waters. That is the diagnosis offered by the prophets, the great doctors of sick societies..

Someone will ask—But *who can say what is and is not true worship?* Well, you know the Bible's answer. Prophets can say. Those four premises are the promises of the prophets—blessings and curses whose sober validity is rooted in our anthropology, our psychology, our bones. Justice means right relationship to all creatures great and small. True worship means right relationship between the human creature and the Creator. But when worship instills pride of place instead of humility before the One, the worshipers are lost to injustice. When worship foments fear of the foreign instead of fear of the Lord, the worshipers devise torments on their beds. And when with angry self-righteousness, activists storm out to do justice, not anchored to any worship that calls them down from their chariots, home into humility and love for their enemies, their actions scorch the earth, bring no peace, and burn out. Justice and true worship are the outside and the inside of the one cup from which all humanity drinks living water. You cannot take them apart. Where is there false worship? Wherever injustice mildews and corrupts God's world. Count on it, declare the prophets.



When Jesus takes his three closest, Peter, James, and John, up a high mountain apart, worship-and-justice is the subject. This is always the Bible's subject. It was the subject ages and ages before, when Elijah, inflamed with fear and anger at the evils of king Ahab, was himself taken up a high mountain apart to get the divine relationship right. Elijah expected God's instruction in a show of power. Now it's the disciples' turn. They know the stories. Aren't they hot with excitement to be singled out for the great journey of beloved disciples up the mountain apart with the master? Yes they want to worship—but their motive is twisted by self-interest.

Of the event called transfiguration, the stories say little—just enough to convey to you and to me that for the disciples, this experience was not like experience. That is, for a moment, they *stopped* watching themselves, stopped wondering who was greatest, stopped worrying how much time this was taking. They were ecstatic—that is, standing outside themselves. They were transcending themselves—worshiping, truly. Speechless. And then they go and spoil it all by saying something stupid like *Hey, Jesus, can't we worship here regularly? This feels so good. We could build three shrines, and we three could come up here, say, every Sunday, and James could lead the service at the Elijah church and John could have the Moses. . .* They didn't know what to say. In the confusion of self-interest, they exited the spirit of worship and entered the business of religion. Out of beauty, back into duty.

Then the overshadowing cloud. Then the voice from the cloud. "This is my beloved son. Listen to him." Shhhhhh. Speechless, they worship, truly, again. The voice from the cloud does not say, *This is my beloved son—worship him*. No, but "Listen to him." This awesome, uttermost sensing of the reality of the One—that is the true worship. It is not the right set of symbols or words or doctrines or songs. What shows up for the disciples here and for Elijah in his story and for Moses in his and for Arjuna in his and for Buddha in his is two-fold: First, true worship is speechless. How strange to say that with four words. Second, true worship midwives justice. How strange to say that with words only.

First worship is speechless. It means this: So long as we remain in control, the gift of true worship has not yet overshadowed us. Can we build three booths? Can we fill three slots on the board? Can we find three readers? There has to be a God somewhere! Shhhhhh. Speechless means that you know that your relationship with the reality of the One God cannot be captured by any words or any actions—cannot be captured, cannot be boothed or booked, cannot be made to show up Sundays at 11:00. True worship is a gift whose timing you cannot predict, but for which you can prepare yourself, to be ready. Silence within is the great vessel. In all the stories, going to the high mountain apart symbolizes the act of preparation—learning the practice of silence, where you no longer feel after yourself but rather the gift of your creation, along with all things, and peace with all creation in the hand of your Creator. Speechless.

After it is speechless, true worship is active. It is justice. God sends Moses down from the mountain to "set my people free." God sends Elijah down from the mountain, freed from his fears of persecution, into a flame of just action that brings Ahab's rule to ruin. Now Jesus is taking the disciples down the mountain. Up there, they do not linger. That would not be true worship. Down they come to work and heal. On the way, Jesus teaches them his crucifixion-resurrection. They listen, speechless. They do not understand. Therefore, he charges them to remain speechless about their experience on the mountain. Stay speechless, O disciples of mine; do not start a church until you know that life and death are not what they seem—but that giving yourself up brings life, and clinging to yourself brings death.

Immediately, Jesus and his disciples are in a great crowd. Someone wants to know what they were talking about up there. The disciples do not answer. Next, someone has a boy with a severe disability. It "dashes him down and he foams and grinds his teeth and gets rigid," says the father, "but your disciples couldn't help." Jesus is exasperated. He knows he cannot be the one to carry out the great

work of healing and justice. He knows that disciples—you, O church—must soon learn to heal. He knows that the grief of this severely disabled boy and his father, both cast out from all favor and freedom in that society, reveals the evil in all religion and politics, all false worship and unjust advantage. And he knows that for this aggrieved family, his disciples were not able to do justice because they had not been worshiping in spirit and in truth; had not waited for the gift of speechlessness; had not yet given birth to the silent Self within.

There's more to this story. Go and read Mark 9. But hear how it ends. Jesus heals that boy. The disciples ask, "Why couldn't we do that?" He says this kind of evil can only be driven out by prayer and fasting. In other words, only true worship makes justice possible. How can it be that an outwardly religious nation who love to tell the stories of Jesus the healer, do not yearn to bring health and healing to every person who cannot pay between our shining seas? Is it because we as a people have no true worship, no great silence, no speechless place within from which the justice of God may be born? The Bible tells me so.

What to do? You cannot change others, except by force, and force often distorts justice. Trust this, rather. The greatest gift you can give the world is to be a vessel for the light of God, ready to heal and to do justice by the light of God. Therefore, prepare yourself as a living sanctuary for the gift of speechless truth. Find the ways of right worship deep within. True worship heralds the path to justice, on earth as it is in heaven.

Let's not assume, however, that Sunday morning service punches the clock for true worship. It may not. This last Friday evening, my Beth and I went to see the Bill T Jones' Dance Company perform Jones' astounding work\* of grief and hope and wisdom for America's great struggle to make freedom ring for black as well as white. I was speechless. That was some true worship. Unlike those pastors terrified by Islam, I don't pretend to know the boundary lines for true worship. But I know the signs. Perfect submission, all is at rest—speechless. Then action. Do justice, love mercy, walk humbly with your God into a world made one where righteousness is flowing like an everlasting stream. May you be transfigured by the Word.

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\* *Fondly Do We Hope, Fervently Do We Pray* is touring the U.S. through July ([www.billtjones.org/events](http://www.billtjones.org/events))

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