

“A Time to Keep a Secret and a Time to Share It”

Matthew 17:1-9

Dr. Christopher C. F. Chapman

First Baptist Church, Raleigh

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The February 12, 2020, issue of *The Christian Century* includes the following poem entitled “Sweet Jesus (Peter, on the Mountain),” written by Christine Hemp (p. 22).

Not the light, but how it spoke, his transfigured
flesh an instrument of consonance and discord.
As if that were not enough, Elijah? Moses, too?

James grabbed his knife, John stood mute, dis-
figured by fear. And I? Well, some people act. Some
wait, and then there are those who think out loud.

Let’s build three sheds! I shouted, instantly
regretting it. What I meant was *hold still*, but my words
never come out right. When light stopped throbbing,

tympany broke the sky. It shook us hard. That voice.
Nothing I want to hear again, believe me. Later,
stumbling downhill, following his easy stride,

we knew our former selves were done. *Sweet Jesus*
my body bucked with the secret we were sworn
to keep. When I couldn’t sleep under insufficient

stars, I rose and tore my tunic off, ripped it in two.

It is a provoking poem with words and images that stir the
imagination and elicit visceral responses. You many respond to

different parts of the poem, but I love these elements – transfigured flesh... consonance and discord... James grabbed his knife... I shouted, instantly regretting it... when light stopped throbbing, tympany broke the sky... that voice, nothing I want to hear again... we knew our former selves were done. Each word, each phrase, describes part of a story we already know, a story we have read today, the story of transfiguration, but the careful choice of words draws our attention to details we may have missed and thus deepens our connection to the story.

One final image of this poem that intrigues me is this – my body bucked with the secret we were sworn to keep. It is a reference to what scholars call the *messianic secret*. On numerous occasions, Jesus commands his disciples not to tell others something about him, to keep it a secret. It seems strange, but on each occasion, he fears that people will misunderstand what kind of messiah he is - think that he is one who will conquer by force, not one who will lay down his life for his friends. On this occasion, he instructs Peter, James and John, “Tell no one about the vision until after the Son of Man has been raised.”

This is not new information, but this phrase - my body bucked with the secret we were sworn to keep – draws our attention to what it must feel like for these three disciples to have to keep this particular secret. They have caught a glimpse of Jesus in all his glory and it has rattled their very existence. They must be bursting at the seams to tell someone about the experience. If Facebook and Twitter existed, they would want to post and tweet all day! But Jesus says – tell no one... until... My body *bucked* with the secret we were sworn to keep. I’ll bet it did...

And we know what this feels like, do we not? We know how difficult it is to keep a secret, to hold on to some bit of significant information, bad news at times, but even more so – good news. A loved one is expecting a child, a friend has been offered a new job, a special party or recognition is being planned, but we can’t say a word about it because it is a secret for now. Our bodies are bucked in the process, jolted in resistance, but there is a time to keep a secret.

And yet, there is also a time to share that secret. Jesus instructs Peter, James and John to tell no one about his transfiguration experience

until he has been raised, but once he has been raised, they are free to share this incredible story. In our reading from the Christian Testament today, we find an example of such sharing. Though the letter is attributed to Peter, there is much dispute among scholars about its authorship, but this description of the transfiguration experience is surely the kind of thing Peter would have shared with people after Jesus' death and resurrection, as is the author's insistence that authentic faith is grounded in personal experience with God – like Peter, James and John had on the mountain – not simply clever ideas about God.

There is a time to keep a secret and there is a time to share it. Once Christ suffers and dies on a cross, and then is raised to new life, all holds are off, all secrets are out in the open. It is fine to share the whole story because there is no longer any fear of misunderstanding. And that is good news for us because our bodies can only take so much bucking. We need to tell others about the baby who is on the way, the dream job that has been found, the great celebration that will take place. And we need to tell others about our transfiguration experiences, our personal encounters with the Holy. The trouble is sometimes we are reticent to share these experiences even when there is no need to keep a secret.

One reason we hesitate to tell others about our experience with God is the fear that they might think we are crazy. I'm not just talking about the most dramatic encounters, like with a 900-foot-tall Jesus Oral Roberts once claimed to see, but even our more subtle, quiet experiences of the Holy. We live in a time when many people just don't believe there is any spiritual reality at all. All experiences can be explained scientifically. We may have thought it was God, but it was really just fatigue or endorphins or something. And on one level, something biochemical or psychological may have been going on, but this doesn't mean God wasn't involved.

In his book *Prayer* the brilliant English pastor George Buttrick created this imaginary yet believable conversation between a preacher and a scientist to illustrate the various levels of truth in some situations.

The preacher: Why did the walls of Jericho fall just when Joshua's trumpets blew?

The scientist: They didn't fall.

The preacher: Yes, they fell. They have been found, the bricks in courses such as are made only by outward falling. Nor is there good reason to doubt the identity in time of the blown trumpets and the falling walls. Such identities occur. Why did the walls when the trumpets blew?

The scientist: Probably an earthquake.

The preacher: Possibly, and perhaps probably. That portion of the planet's surface is known to be an earth fault. But why did the two events happen together?

The scientist: Mere coincidence.

The preacher: Coincidences are never 'mere.' What does the word mean?

The scientist: It means they happened together.

The preacher: We began with that fact. Why did they happen together?

The scientist: It was coincidence. (pp. 100-101)

We get the point. Just because science can explain certain realities on one level does not rule out spiritual dimensions on another. But for many people today, logic only drives thought to the point at which it leaves room for a reality they don't believe exists. So, if we start talking about a direct encounter with God, they may think we are crazy, one of those wacky religious types. So, we keep our experience to ourselves.

Another reason we might hesitate to tell others about our transfiguration experiences is that it is difficult to find words that do them justice. Every attempt we make seems to reduce or cheapen the experience. You can't tell someone what it is like to take in the view of Lake Nakuru in Kenya with all the flamingos surrounding it, the rhinos and waterbuck roaming nearby. You can't explain why the birth of this child in this family means what it does. You can't contain the mystery of Christ you feel in a moment of worship or service to someone in need, but it is real, it is transforming. There just aren't any words to capture it. So, sometimes we don't even try. We just keep the experience to ourselves, treasure it in our heart, like Mary.

And there are other reasons why we might not tell anyone about our experience with God, including a desire to avoid giving the kind of witness to our faith that turns people off. In her book *Out of the Saltshaker and into the World: Evangelism as a Way of Life*, Rebecca Manley Pippert said this, “There was a part of me that secretly felt evangelism was something you shouldn’t do to your dog, let alone your friend (p. 16).” We know what she meant and we don’t want to have any part in this kind of evangelism.

In the book *Same Kind of Different as Me*, co-author Ron Hall recalls visiting an evangelical church in the 1960’s with his new wife (pp. 60-61). They were invited to a Sunday evening discussion group that pushed for conversion. If you hadn’t accepted Jesus on their terms by the sixth Sunday, you were probably going to hell on Monday. Hall’s wife was asked if she was saved and if she was certain she would go to heaven. “Well, my daddy paved the parking lot at the Snyder Methodist Church,” she said, “and that’s good enough for me!”

In the end, Hall and his wife made professions of faith, in spite of this caustic approach, but he says he mourns the mutual wounds inflicted in verbal battles with the “unsaved” and has chosen to delete that term from his vocabulary. He says he cannot see into the hearts of others and know their spiritual condition. He can only “tell the jagged tale of my own spiritual journey and declare that my life has been better for having followed Christ.”

We don’t want people to think we are crazy, nor do we want to cheapen our experience with inadequate words, and we certainly don’t want any part in counterproductive evangelism, but we do have a calling to share our experience with others, to tell the jagged tale of our journey and declare that our life is better for having followed Christ. If we have ever encountered the Holy in a personal way, if we have known God as more than a conceptual framework or exercise in wishful thinking - as a powerful, transforming presence of love - then we have a need to share this experience, not keep it in, and others have a need to hear our story.

Especially in this time when we seem to be trying to put out all the sacred fires – to us an image of Rabbi Harold Kushner’s (from *Who*

Needs God) – people need evidence that there is more to life and this world than the eye can see and the ear can hear. Secondhand faith, as the author of 2 Peter asserts, isn't worth much. We each need our own personal experience with God. But in sharing our experience with others, we can point them in the direction of hope.

While we were in central Florida last month for the annual Pastor's Conference at Stetson University, Dana and I did something we have not done before. We went to the Blue Springs State Park near Deland to see the manatees. They gather in a small inlet off the St. John's River in the winter because it is fed by spring water that stays around 72 degrees. The day we went, there were over 400 manatees luxuriating in the warm water, including a mother nursing her baby. It was incredible!

I cannot enable you to experience the wonder just by talking about it. But by telling you about the experience, rather than keeping it a secret, I can let you know it is there for you too. That knowledge alone can be helpful. That's why there is a time to share our experience.

We don't know what those early disciples talked the most about in their daily witness when the time came to share their experience. Was it the shining light or the majestic voice? Was it the cloud that covered and revealed? Was it the message that Jesus was God's Beloved Son and they should listen to him? Was it the fact that Jesus touched them gently and told them not to be afraid? We don't know. We only know that there was a time to keep a secret and a time to share it. So it goes for us. May we discern wisely which time we are in at any point on our journey and prove faithful to our calling in it!