

Last Sunday of Epiphany YA 2023
Matthew's Transfiguration

Let Us Keep Silence
By the Rev. Salying Wong

Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and his brother John and led them up a high mountain. Well, what happened six days ago? Six days ago, Peter confessed that Jesus was the messiah, the son of the living God. Six days ago, Jesus told them what kind of messiah he intended to be—that he would be crucified and after three days rise. And six days ago, Jesus said that if they wanted to follow him, their path would look like his; they must pick up their own cross. No matter how they diced it, the cross sucked. This was terrible news.

At the time, there was no way Peter and the others could have understood that the cross and the resurrection were one. Six days ago, Jesus gave his first passion prediction. But that was also the first resurrection prediction. But that got lost. When Peter took Jesus aside to rebuke him, Peter had only the crucifixion on his mind. When Peter rebuked Jesus for the shameful death he said he would die, he was really blaming Jesus for the death of a vision of how life ought to unfold, how it ought to turn out. It was a vision of the world where God would fix things. Jesus going to the cross might mean that God would not interfere to fix the world according to his liking.

But Jesus wasn't here to fulfill Peter's vision of the world, no matter how noble it was. Jesus wanted to show Peter and all the disciples and all of us another way, the way of the cross by which one finds God in the heap of tragedy. Tragedies will not disappear. That is not the promise of the reign of God. The promise is immanuel, God pitching their tent with us, to show us the way to life in the midst of death. Six days ago, Jesus said, "For what will it profit someone to save their life and lose their own soul?"

Because the disciples' hearts and minds had grown heavy with preemptive grief, six days later, Jesus took his three saddest ones up a mountain. He wanted to give them a glimpse of the resurrection, so that their hearts would not be defeated by the tragedy to come. So Jesus trudged Peter, James and John up the mountain. The three grumbled underneath their breath. Another mountain! Didn't we just climb one to hear that long ass sermon? It went on and on...salt, light, lilies, birds...blah, blah, blah. The coffee was getting cold; the donuts weren't going to eat themselves! And now, this mountain was even higher. How come the other nine were spared the climb—not fair!

Cresting the top, Jesus turned to them and said, "I've brought you up here so you can take the long view. Take a look at all that God loves." They looked and they shrugged, "So, what?" and each let out a jaw-cracking yawn. Then Jesus said, "You must take on God's eyes. You must take the long divine gaze of love and then what you see becomes real." And he demonstrated. He looked with the divine gaze upon the valley, pausing as if over each and every soul, nodding as in acknowledgement of every story. And then suddenly, everything lit up in dazzling light. Jesus himself turned brilliant as the sun and his clothes turned white as metal when it burns its hottest.

Peter, James and John were amazed! And yet, and yet, this light though it appeared out of this world—it had something familiar about it. What was familiar about it? They couldn't put their finger on it, but they suspected that they'd always known it—or more true, it had always known them.

Moses and Elijah appeared. Moses and the law. Elijah the prophet. A spark of remembrance about the law and the prophets—and the disciples searched their minds. Did not Jesus say something about the summary of the law and the prophets? What is the summary of the law and the prophets? Was this moment the summary of the law and the prophets?

Not knowing what to make of this, Peter reached back to the way things had always been done. What did the ancient Israelites do when Moses was shining

like the sun? They made a tent. So, Peter suggested crafting some tents, one for Moses, one for Elijah and one for Jesus. Seeing and seeing, he did not perceive. Hearing and hearing, he did not understand.

Suddenly a voice from heaven said, "This is my beloved. Listen to him! Come on guys! Are you listening?" They realized they didn't know how to listen; they didn't know how to see. They quaked with fear and fell to the ground. But Jesus touched them and said, "Do not be afraid." And just like that, Jesus began to walk down the mountain. The disciples hustled after him, still bewildered.

While walking down, Jesus said, "Tell no one about the vision till the Son of Man has been raised." Why? Jesus could have said, "Well, you wouldn't be able to explain it. It remains an abstraction till you suffer, till grief makes you do all kinds of things you never thought you'd do—like run away, like betraying the one you love, like your knees buckling under you and you weep yourself to exhaustion. It is only after these things that talking about that light of glory embedded in all reality would be believable to you—and then to others. This is what it means to love what is real rather than what you want or what should be. Loving what is real breaks your heart and builds it up again, crucifixion and resurrection happen at the same time. This is why we come down the mountain, to weep with those who weep and rejoice with those who rejoice. We must have more of the real before we are ready for the light, before we have eyes to see the light that starts as soon as the dying begins. Till then, keep silence."

There are a variety of silences. There is the silence of complicity with things that hurt; there is the silence that is self-preservation. But there is also holy silence. This silence is not really about not just talking. It is the silence of the intrepid commentaries we make in a flash, in a nanosecond, on what we see or think we see and become utterly convinced that we perceive. Holy silence unknows our easy conclusions, sits in a posture of humility before life as it is. It is this silence that generates the kind of listening that is required to walk the way of the cross and to perceive resurrection.

I remember my commentary when I watched those buildings fall in Turkey. Quicker than a nanosecond, I drew a conclusion; I whispered under my breath, "God doesn't care about us. If God cared, God would stop this." I knew there was something wrong within me, but my heart ached so much, I couldn't think. Not knowing what to do, I sat in silence, wept and sat in more silence. I now see that I, like Peter, have a vision of a world that I would like for God to make happen. It is such a noble vision. It is so noble that if God doesn't do it, then God is not as compassionate as I am. What is really true, though, is that I do not like being so powerless, and I want God to do my bidding with God's power.

Silence saves my soul. Quieting the commentary in my head about how this and that should be—it releases me from my anger at my own powerlessness. Today, as my mind is boggled by the staggering suffering, the staggering death of tragedy, silence protects me from being defeated by the immensity. I sit in my smallness so that I can consider God's largeness. I contemplate a God whose love is infinitely more personal than my heartache over images on a screen. I keep silence so I can listen to those who are in pain and to those who find God in the midst of their own suffering. I keep silence so that I can love what is real and not a fantasy—and so to perceive that dying ignites a familiar light—a light that has always known us before we knew it.