

Beloved—Part 2 [Scott Kinder-Pyle]
Matthew 17:1—9; Exodus 24:12—18

Without a doubt the costumes from 1985 must have been bright. The multi-colored fabric must have dazzled the eye. Every seam, every thread beneath the spotlight must have kept the audience spellbound. Performed right here at Northwood (when Rev. John Pierce served as pastor), *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dream Coat* must have been glorious. And to this day, you may have noticed the main character's costume encased in a Plexiglas booth right next to the door. I myself have seen the VHS tape on a shelf in my office which is labeled *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dream Coat*. And yet, because I no longer own a VCR the glow of those days and nights in 1985 has faded... Of course, that was also the year that Michael J. Fox starred in the motion picture, *Back to the Future*, and if any of you remember that storyline, you know that once Marty McFly has been transported back to 1955 in a blaze of white light— from his point of view—1985 was always 'the future' he wanted to get back to. And it's confusing, isn't it?

Even though it's entertaining, it's confusing. And what I'm getting at with all this reminiscence about the 'glory days' is the same thing that Matthew's Gospel is getting at in the story of Jesus' transfiguration. That is—mind the gaps in time: ***“Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter, James and his brother John...”*** And yet, (what may not be so obvious is that) the gospel writer has scribbled down these words *three decades later*. And we, of course, come upon the story two thousand years later. So where does the glory go? Where does the dazzling light go? And WHY does the voice that says, ***“This is my Son, the Beloved”*** seem to come ... and go?

Our adult son Philip once took his cell phone to *the Globe*, which is a downtown pub; and at 1:17 a.m., when I was drifting off to sleep, a voice came to me. The ringtone I downloaded for Philip is the Neil Young song, *Searching for a Heart of Gold*, so I knew it was him when I heard the lyric, “I wanna live...” And yet when I answered all I could make out on the other end was a commotion of clinking glasses and the kind of rap-music that I typically do not enjoy. (Apparently, it was an inadvertent call.) I said, “Are you okay?” No response. I shouted, “Philip? Are you okay?” And still no response. Sheryl, sitting up next to me, then grabbed the phone and ratcheted up the volume as only a mother’s concerned, shrill voice can do... and still nothing... Nothing but laughter and the muffled cadence of a table conversation that we were not a part of.

Now think for a moment about another conversation that we’re not necessarily a part of—the one between Moses and Elijah as they are each **“talking with”** Jesus. What takes place on top of the mountain is dazzling and full of radiant splendor. But it’s also a dialogue between the past and the future—and we are overhearing it! We can’t quite make out what’s being said exactly. But we do know someone we love, and maybe someone who loves us—the Beloved Son of God—is in the middle of it. ‘Are you okay?’ I don’t know about you, but in my journey of faith there are times when all I want is to protect and preserve the mountaintop glory. And then a cloud—even a bright cloud—overshadows everything. And just like that early morning ‘butt dial’ from my son’s cell-phone, I’m frantic and afraid about what I might be missing.

“Then Peter said to Jesus, ‘Lord, it is good for us to be here; if you wish, I will make three dwellings here, one for you, one for Moses and one for Elijah.’”

And why? Because he doesn’t want to miss anything. Maybe, for example, Moses is saying something about what’s been etched in stone: ***“I am the Lord your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery...”*** No one wants to miss that. Every commandment in Exodus 20 and Deuteronomy 5 depends upon Yahweh uttering those words. But did you hear that? In hushed tones, Elijah is also speaking. Back in the days of King Ahab and Queen Jezebel, this prophet was on the run. People didn’t want him to get too political, but he couldn’t help himself. He criticized and condemned the politicians who wanted to make money off religion; and he ended up cowering in a cave on Mount Horeb. In First Kings 19 Elijah whined he was the only prophet left and ***“and they’re seeking my life to take it away.”*** (God then commanded him to go out and face the storm, the wind, the earthquake and the fire.) And yet, here he is, in the quiet lull of the conversation, saying something more to Jesus. What is it?

You see, the glory of the past is phenomenal—and to be sure, the glory of Northwood’s past is phenomenal. But as soon as Peter seems intoxicated with making a monument of that glory by encasing it on the mountain, it’s Jesus alone; and his clothing’s no longer dazzling white and the pores of his face are no longer glistening. And before anybody understands what’s going on, we’re headed back down sooner than we think. ***“Tell no one about this,”*** Jesus says in Matthew 17:9. And don’t you wonder why?

One reason may be that he does not want any disciple of any time to fall in love with the glory days of the past. The glory days fade. That's what they do. Michael J. Fox, the actor who played that spry, skateboard-riding kid grows into an old man with Progressive Parkinson's Disease. The costume from the performance of *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dream Coat* becomes a little ragged behind the glass. Jesus wants disciples who grieve that fading glory and say goodbye to it. So, he says, ***"Tell no one about this... until the Son of Man has been raised from the dead."*** And that's not just about the glory that is to come, but the indestructible love that Jesus exudes when things fall apart, break down and go dark.

Yesterday was, of course, *Valentine's Day*. So let me tell you the whole romantic story: nearly three centuries after Jesus' life, death and resurrection, around 270 C.E., the Roman Emperor Claudius II wants to encourage all the men of a certain age to join the army; and because he wants these men to be lean, mean, macho-fighting machines, the Emperor issues an edict prohibiting marriage and thus promoting the most brutalizing, non-empathetic behavior possible in ranks of the Roman legions. Well, along comes Bishop Valentine of Tierno, who doesn't believe that war is so glorious, and who doesn't believe 'Might Makes Right.' And so, he disobeys the edit and performs marriages right and left until... he's imprisoned. Legend has it, he then befriended his jailor's blind daughter and healed her. Then, before his death sentence was carried out, he scrawled a note to the girl. He signed it, "From your Valentine."

“This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well-pleased; listen to him.” You see, Valentine—the real Saint Valentine—was listening to him. He wasn’t listening to Cupid, Aphrodite or Venus. And that’s Part 2 of what it means for Jesus to be recognized as God’s Beloved.

Anton Chekhov once wrote a short story in which a teenage girl, named Nadenka, is invited by her boyfriend to go tobogganing down a steep hill of ice and snow. They go, and as the Russian author describes the scene it’s from the boyfriend’s point of view:

“The air cleft by our flight beat in our faces, roared and whistled in our ears, tore at us, ripped us cruelly in its anger, tried to tear our heads off our shoulders. We had hardly the strength to breathe from the pressure of the wind. It seemed as though the devil himself had caught us in his claws and was dragging us with a roar to hell. Surrounding objects melted into one long furiously racing streak... another moment and it seemed we should perish...”

And then: “I love you, Nadya!”

Now the story is entitled *A Joke*. But that single sentence is no joke. The boyfriend says it out loud; and he says it repeatedly each time they descend the hill. Nadya looks at him when they reach the bottom. She expects him, quite rightfully, to follow up. But as Chekhov fast-forwards in time, the young couple never marry. They drift apart. Nadya marries someone else, has children and grows older. The boyfriend from the toboggan ride is long gone; the glory of that moment, careening down the hill of snow, has faded. But the love?

Is there a love that doesn't need the bright lights to perpetually shine? Is there a love that doesn't require a purchase of chocolates or flowers? Jesus, as the Beloved Son of God, casts a profound and mysterious shadow over every kind of love that's typically glorified in the society at large: romantic love, family love, friendship love... All of these relationships, when they germinate and blossom, are worthy of celebration. But at the root and at the source of every one of the is the love that's going through death and make a joke of it. There is a love that comes out the other side. And when we lose a romantic partner, when we lose a family member, when lose a friend, who knows what's next?

And one more thing—when we lose the glory of what we thought church was and should always be—who knows what's next?