

They'd Had a Tough Week

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It had been a tough week for Jesus and his posse. As Robert Brown observes in [UNEXPECTED NEWS: READING THE BIBLE WITH THIRD WORLD EYES](#), the realm of God wasn't "exactly appearing overnight."¹

In a sobering moment, King Herod Antipas arrested Jesus' cousin, John the Baptizer, and beheaded him.

After fleeing north to escape Herod, Jesus asked his closest friends, "Who do people say I am." And then more pointedly, "Who do you say I am?" Peter nails the answer with, "You are the anointed one, Son of the Living God." Jesus used the moment to clarify for the group what Peter's answer meant. ²¹ *From that time on, Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering at the hands of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised.*² And then, if that wasn't scary enough, Jesus adds, "If any [of you] want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow [after] me. ²⁵ *For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it. ²⁶ *For what will it profit them if they gain the whole world but forfeit their life? Or what will they give in return for their life?*³*

"Jesus' followers had never seen crosses dangling over the stomachs of princes of the church, writes Brown, "but had seen plenty of crosses used as instruments of torture and very, very slow death."⁴

How does one hashtag that? Yes, it had indeed been a rough week for Jesus and his followers.

One might think that being on a mountain with Jesus, and seeing him shining in all his glory accompanied by the Lawgiver, Moses, and the Proclaimer of Justice, Elijah, both dead for millennia but now somehow alive, would have captured the attention of John, James and Peter. But they were exhausted. They'd had about as much 'rough week' as anyone could bear. So they laid down into as much sleep as they could find. There was a time for staying awake with

¹ Robert McAfee Brown. *Unexpected Eyes: Reading the Bible with Third World Eyes*. P. 118ff

² *The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version*. (1989). (Mt 16:21). Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers.

³ *The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version*. (1989). (Mt 16:24–26). Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers.

⁴ Robert McAfee Brown. *Unexpected Eyes: Reading the Bible with Third World Eyes*

Jesus but this was not it. This was a moment for surrendering to tired, and their feelings of enough.

After the mountain-top-experience in which Jesus took on the physical identity that is the real Son of God's due, Jesus and his three climbing companions descend into the reality of a man whose soul is pierced through with the pain of caring for his epileptic son, the seizures of whom have thrown him into the fire to be burned, and rolled him into the water leaving him nearly drowned. His last hope had been Jesus' followers waiting at the foot of the mountain for Jesus to come down again, but they hadn't been able to cure the boy of his illness.

What is a few moments of Jesus shining with God's glory when your cousin and best friend had been set up to be murdered, when your child faces the possibility of death everyday from his illness?

Being God's anointed, the Son of the Living God, doesn't mean much to anyone but the anointed one if all you do with it is enjoy it on the mountain.

Being on the mountain with God's anointed and witnessing the glory of God doesn't mean very much to anyone but you if all you want to do with the experience is relish the perks of having had the vision.

This story's meaning is all about God's glory - the anointed One through whom that glory broke into the world, and the ones who witnessed God's glory in the anointed One - coming back down the mountain and into the lives of families like the family of the epileptic boy, or the martyred John the Baptist. **God's glory only means something if we do something with it.**

Those few moments of glory give meaning and reliability to the words that accompany them - words from God. Did you catch God's words about the experience? "This One is my beloved; listen to him." Did you hear what Jesus said? "Rise up and fear not!"

Four other SWC pastors and I were at the ICE⁵ building in downtown Phoenix when Guadalupe Rayos reported for her check-in appointment and was detained on Feb. 8. She was deported the next day. She was the test case for our new immigration rules for undocumented non-violent offenders. That was a tough week for the Rayos family; I saw it on their faces. It was a tough week for every family who has an undocumented loved one with a traffic ticket.

⁵ *Immigration and Customs Enforcement*

Earlier that morning the SWC announced that it joined other faith communities in filing an amicus brief in the Eastern District of New York on behalf of two Iraqi refugees denied entry into the US. Ahmed Darweesh is a husband and the father of three children. He worked for the US military and his life was in danger in Iraq due to that relationship. The wife and son of Hader Alshawi, the other plaintiff in the case, were threatened because of their perceived ties to the US. Both men had been granted legal entry into the US only to arrive and be detained and threatened with deportation. That was a tough week for Darweesh and Alshawi and for every refugee awaiting entry into this country.

Next week the SWC becomes a friend of the US Supreme Court because we have befriended Gavin Grimm, a Texas High School student denied access to school facilities because he is a transgender youth. This week was a particularly tough week for Gavin and every trans high school student because rules protecting them and granting them access to facilities appropriate to their expressed gender were rescinded by the President.

Pastors all over our conference, and throughout our beloved United Church of Christ, have shared stories with me that everything they say seems to be heard as political speech. Maybe the examples of people having tough weeks sounded political or even partisan to you.

“Empathy seems like an act of defiant resistance,” wrote John Pavlovitz in a recent blog, “and in many ways, it now is. Maybe homeless refugees and sick children and the working poor and black lives and fewer guns and universal healthcare are indeed now ‘Democratic talking points,’ he continues. “And if they are, then you should take a long look in the mirror, let your knees hit the floor, and ask Jesus just why that is. Maybe some repentance is in order.”⁶

Before anyone accuses any preacher of being political because she or he proclaims those talking points, remember that those very same talking points are in every sacred text known by humanity.

“When Did Compassion Become Partisan Politics?” asks Pavlovitz.⁷ Yes, when did compassion become partisan politics?!

You see, beloved, the people whose stories I shared with you a moment ago are at the foot of our mountaintop experience here this morning, and they’re waiting to see what we will do with the glory of God we’ve experienced. As dark and terrifying as things might get, in the deepest,

⁶ <http://johnpavlovitz.com/2017/02/19/when-did-compassion-become-partisan-politics/>

⁷ *Ibid.*

worn out, tired, lost, scared and confused moments of our lives, God's voice still breaks into human experience inviting us to listen, to rise up, and to fear not.

NT Wright, in his book *Simply Jesus*, invites us to

“suppose, just suppose, that the ancient prophetic dream had glimpsed a deeper truth. Suppose there were a god like Israel's God. Suppose this God did after all make the world. And suppose [God] were to claim, at long last, ... sovereign rights over that world, not to destroy it ... or merely to “intervene” in it from time to time..., but to fill it with ... glory, to allow [us] to enter a new mode in which [we] would reflect [divine] love, [divine] generosity, [the Creator's] desire to make it over anew.

“[That] might mean a living God really had established ... sovereign rule on earth as in heaven and was intending to [put] an end to the fantasy of human sovereignty, of being the master of one's own fate and the captain of one's own soul, of humans organizing the world as though they were responsible to nobody but themselves.

“Perhaps the real challenge of Jesus's transformations within the material world is what they would imply both [spiritually] and politically.”

In the transformation/transfiguration story of Jesus on the mountain, “Jesus seems to be the place where God's world and ours meet...where God's new creation intersects with ours.” What if the gospels are not about “how Jesus turned out to be God.” What if they are about how God is becoming more and more “ruler on earth as in heaven.” Isn't that, after all, how Jesus taught his followers to pray? “Your kingdom come, will be done on earth as it is in heaven.”⁸

Sometimes whole churches get caught up in their own moments of glory - past days on the mountain top - as if those glory days were an end in and of themselves. Like Peter sometimes congregations want to enshrine them, build booths of veneration to them, and never let them go.

But in today's texts Jesus and his followers are new players in the old, old story of God's encounters with God's people.⁹ And so are we! Moments of glory like this one today are only valuable if in them we are transformed in ways that bring God's presence, God's glory, God's compassion into the time and space of suffering and marginalized ones, in ways that heal and bring hope. The story of Jesus' transfiguration/ transformation invites us to spend our lives

⁸ NT Wright. *Simply Jesus*.

⁹ Audrey West http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=27

stepping into both God's glory and human suffering in ways that connect one with the other in healing hope-filled ways.

All this is more than supposition, beloved. We are not following cleverly devised myths, wrote Peter. We are in relationship with the powerful and majestic person of Jesus - the Child of the Divine One - who is trustworthy and gives us the strength to do what God has always invited God's people to do: make God known in the world. That's how this season of Epiphany comes to a close. And on Wednesday Lent begins, a season reminding us that there are tough weeks ahead of us, weeks filled with crosses and costs. "It's time to listen, rise up. There isn't any reason to be afraid." Amen.