

Hinde Street Methodist Church

Sunday 14 February 2021 @ 11am

Rev John Swarbrick

2 Kings 2: 1–12

2 Corinthians 4: 3–6

Mark 9: 2–9

THIS morning we have two stories that speak to us about the strangeness of religious experience where the writers are running to catch up. The first is about Elijah, greatest of the Hebrew prophets, as he passes on the baton to Elisha as his successor, and Elisha witnesses Elijah's being taken up to heaven in a whirlwind, complete with chariots of fire. The second is the account of the Transfiguration where a select group of three of Jesus' disciples is caught up in a visionary religious experience on the mountain; and it's that story which I want to focus on this morning.

We ask ourselves: 'What's going on? What's the point of this story?' What is *ever* point of this kind of intense, visionary religious experience? It would be nice to think that for Peter, James and John, it is a way of strengthening and clarifying their understanding of all that has been, and all that is yet to come in their relationship with Jesus. But there is a cross and a tomb, and there are abandoned grave-clothes, and all these things must come into play before the rapturous vision on the mountain becomes part of a story that will renew the world.

For a moment, it's not like that. Peter, James and John come down from mountain much as they went up: jockeying for leadership roles, asking misguided questions, missing the point, failing at every turn to see the significance of this, the final journey with Jesus to Jerusalem. There is a world down at the bottom of the mountain—a world of people waiting, people hoping for inspiration, people expectant for a voice of (re)assurance.

This isn't to knock intense religious experience. The visions and voices recorded in the Scriptures are not some tacky exercise in self-indulgence or self-centredness. Whether they occur on Mount Sinai or Mount Horeb, on the bank of the River Jordan, on the road to Emmaus, or on the road to Damascus, such revelations of the glory of God are always and everywhere intended as a source of inspiration and encouragement for the building-up of the *whole* community of faith, for growth in wisdom and hope, for the proclamation of the good news of God's presence and love. They serve to unleash a torrent of spiritual energy and commitment in the people who are touched by them.

In shorthand terms, they are moments of disclosure; they are pictures of what it means to be open to God. Now here's a view, not so much from the mountain-top as from the fields below. It doesn't come from Scripture, but from an unlikely witness to an extraordinary personal experience: a fearless investigative journalist for *The New York Times*, and a novelist. Barbara Ehrenreich is a fully-paid up member of the awkward squad—a bit like one of the prophets of the Old Testament. Her book *Living with a Wild God* takes us to a place of testing and self-examination where all illusion and delusion are stripped away. She describes herself as an atheist, and a vocal one, for most of her 77 years; but in that memoir published in May 2014, she reveals that she had an experience when she was 17, which she has struggled to understand ever since.

After driving through the desert, Barbara Ehrenreich spent a night sleeping in a car on the side of the road at Lone Pine in California, and then in the early morning she went for a walk. This is part of her story. The Revd Liz Nau is going to read it for us.

In the next few minutes, on that empty street, I found whatever I had been looking for. Here we leave the jurisdiction of language, where nothing is left but the vague gurgles of surrender expressed in words such as 'ineffable' and 'transcendent'. For most of the intervening years, my general thought has been: if there are no words for it, then don't say anything about it. Otherwise you risk slipping into 'spirituality', which is, in addition to being a crime against reason, of no interest to other people than your dreams.

But there is one image, handed down over the centuries, that seems to apply, and that is the image of fire, as in the 'burning bush'. At some point in my pre-dawn walk—not at the top of a hill or the exact moment of sunrise, but in its own good time—the world flamed into life. How else to describe it? There were no visions, no prophetic voices or visits by totemic animals, just this blazing everywhere. Something poured into me and I poured out into it. This was not the passive beatific merger with 'the all', as promised by the eastern mystics. It was a furious encounter with a living substance that was coming at me through all things at once, and one reason for the terrible wordlessness of the experience is that you cannot observe fire really closely without becoming part of it. Whether you start as a twig or a gorgeous tapestry, you will be recruited into the flame and made indistinguishable from the rest of the blaze.

'Ecstasy' would be the word for this, but only if you are willing to acknowledge that ecstasy does not occupy the same spectrum as happiness or euphoria, that it participates in the anguish of loss and can resemble an outbreak of violence.

The function of the desert was to cauterize an open wound. I should have died that day, or—to give it a nice Buddy Holly ring—that should have been the day that I died. I don't mean by this that the rest of my life has been a weary slog; far from it. But the story seemed to end here, or at least that was my strong sense for years to come, into my early 20s anyway, when I carried on with the mechanics of living in a jaded spirit of someone who knows she has overstayed her visit—seen all the sights and been unable to find any further way to make herself useful. I could not speak of it because I lacked the words, and I could not recapture the experience any more than a burned-out filament could be used to light a fresh bulb . . .

When people run up against something inexplicable, transcendent, and, most of all, ineffable, they often call it 'God', as if that were some sort of explanation. I fell back on this semantic sleight of hand myself once in those first few weeks . . . and instantly regretted it. My friend David and I were driving in LA [Los Angeles] when he asked me how the . . . trip had gone. I said something vague and hesitant, which naturally led him to start nosing around more aggressively, until at last, in a spirit of verbal economy, I blurted out: 'I saw God'. I could see from the wolfish look that came over his face that I had made a terrible mistake, because of course he wanted to know what God was like.

This was totally embarrassing, as if I'd been caught in an act of plagiarism or, more precisely, antiquities theft. Why would I want to apply the ancient, well-worn notion of 'God' to that force or power or energy I'd encountered in Lone Pine, which bore not the slightest resemblance to anything in the religious iconography I had grown up around? There had been no soulful, long-suffering face, no accompanying cherubs or swooning Madonna—no face at all, in fact. God, in the prevailing monotheistic sense, is a curious bundle of admirable or at least impressive qualities, including omnipotence and cosmological creativity. As for the most highly advertised property of the Christian—or Jewish or Islamic—God, that he is 'good', in fact morally 'perfect', I had no evidence of that, derived either from epiphany or from more conventional forms of observation . . .

The 'epiphany', if I may call it that, seemed to be best understood as an explosion, a calamitous natural process like an earthquake or storm, leaving behind it what is known in science fiction as a 'rent in the fabric of space-time'. Something was broken. Things no longer cohered. The world was becoming increasingly hostile, and still I had to try to make my way around in it.¹

Phew! There's more . . . What Barbara Ehrenreich calls the 'Wild God' is the God of transcendence *and* intimacy encountered in Scripture, in the writings of the medieval mystics, even, dare I say it, recorded in a journal entry by a fastidious Anglican clergyman on 24 May 1738. John Wesley's experience of his 'heart strangely warmed' utterly changed the direction of his life and vocation but, as recorded, it comes nowhere near the intensity of what Barbara Ehrenreich calls an 'explosion'—an explosion which has haunted her adult life.

Experiences as different as these still have the power speak to us of the transcendence of the God of the big picture, as well as the intimacy of the God of small things. It's not an exaggeration to claim that every Sunday we are trying to capture something of these dimensions in worship—the transcendent and the intimate—an encounter with the holy, the transformation or transfiguration of day-to-day realities.

It's a delicate balance, as well as a matter of temperament and taste. For some, it is poetry and music and mystery that emphasize the otherness of God; for others, it is about immediacy, informality and intimacy that encourage a sense of the closeness of God. Decency and due order. The freedom of the Spirit. Our tradition in Methodism is about both/and rather than either/or. It has to be some combination of the transcendent *and* the intimate; and just as importantly a recognition that the worship of God's people is always most powerful when the spiritual and the material are closely interwoven.

This is about our human need for ceremony: ceremonies for birth and death, for love, for the changing of the seasons and for the rites of human passage; ceremonies for a vision of a new world and for dealing with the problem of evil, and for the great mysteries of creation, self-sacrifice, suffering, faith and resurrection.

Part of our Methodist heritage has made us distrustful of a lot of this. We trust words rather than ceremony or—horror of horrors!—ritualism. But the Word didn't become flesh simply to become words again. We do not worship only with our minds and cognitive reasoning. True worship engages the whole person—emotions/feelings, the will, our intuition, our body, as well as the intellect. Such worship should enable us to name our truth in ways that have meaning for us: just as important are the visual, the dramatic, the silent, the creative, the playful. So much of our worship is still passive reception. Some still think that participation is bit . . . radical. But liturgy means 'the work of the people', not 'the work of the preacher'. We talk about the priesthood of all believers, but do we mean it?

So when we come to worship, we bring the whole of ourselves: worried about bringing up kids; worried about being alone; struggling with responsibilities for the care of ageing parents; about strain in a marriage or a relationship; or being under enormous pressure at work; or fearful of sudden redundancy; anxious about living on a reduced pension or about the entitlement to benefits; or what it feels like to be a victim of

¹ Barbara Ehrenreich, *Living with a Wild God* (London, 2014).

racism, or labelled because you are a single parent, or gay, or disabled, or have a mental health problem; or living through a pandemic. These are the things that concern people for most of their waking hours; these are the issues that disturb their sleep.

We come to connect all these things with the God who is both transcendent and intimate—whose love is for us and not against us. The God who in Jesus Christ calls us to see the transfiguring power of a relationship of love, openness and trust—and all the potential for human flourishing within that. We come to discover—perhaps rediscover—ways of connecting worship and the rhythm of the Church’s year with the whole of life. This is not a matter of remote, grand abstractions. The story of Jesus is the story of the God with dirty hands: the muck and stench of the stable where he was born, the calloused hands with which he worked in a carpenter’s shop, the spit of soldiers that dribbled down his tortured face—all speak of the God who so completely identified with the human condition and the material world that our struggles, sorrows and disappointments become his own.

So Christmas isn’t all turkey and tinsel: it is what we do with the awesome responsibility that God has been delivered into our hands. Harvest Thanksgiving isn’t nostalgia for a vanished rural past: it is a celebration of the skills of hand and brain, self-worth and survival. Easter isn’t spring flowers and chocolate eggs: it is bearing the marks of the nails seen in the hands of the risen Christ into the world through *our* hands to:

Suffer and serve till are fed
And show how grandly love intends
To work till all creation sings.
To fill all worlds, to crown all things.

StF 499 v 4

And never underestimate the power of the sacraments of Church to make visible the connexions between the spiritual and the material for us in ways that words alone never can. Both Baptism and Holy Communion have a way of expressing essential truths for us in ways that are unsurpassed. Water, bread, wine: there are no more powerful symbols of the freedom and grace of God.

What all worship is seeking to do is ensure that the everyday can be transfigured by an encounter with the holy; that the material in human existence and the spiritual in human existence are not bouncing off each other at a tangent, but are integrated. We come to church to cherish and nurture the claim that God is for all life and in all of life—that in the words of St Irenaeus, one of the great theologians of the early Church, ‘the glory of God is a human being fully alive’. We worship to give expression to God’s reality and our humanity—both in the refreshment and renewal of the human spirit, and in the creation of Christ’s community of love, justice and peace.

O God,
whose beauty is beyond our imagining,
and whose presence we cannot comprehend:
show us your glory so far as we can grasp it,
that we may become fully alive to the potential
you have implanted in each of us,
and that we may go forth to be your people in the world; through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.

