

It was Albert Einstein who famously said in a 1941 conference on science and religion: *Science without religion is lame. Religion without science is blind.* In her book, *Speaking of Faith*, Krista Tippet tells us that Einstein was "content with what he called his 'cosmic religious sense' -- animated by "inklings" and "wonderings" more than answers and conclusions. We arrive at some of these same points in the Bible when we come to the intersection of open ended faith in the familiar words of the father of an epileptic boy who cries out before Jesus: *I believe, help my unbelief.*

We also arrive at some of these same points in the Bible when we come to the intersection of the flaccid ordinary with the charged fantastic. In our Gospel and in our reading from Hebrew scripture we come to some of these moments. In II Kings, Elijah parts the water and crossing to a distinct and private place, Elijah and Elisha await the mystery of the presence of The Holy One of Israel and when the Holy Presence comes, there are chariots of fire and horses of fire and a great whirlwind into which the aged prophet Elijah disappears even as Elisha cries out "Father, father! The chariots of Israel and its horsemen!" The intersection of the ordinary with the charged fantastic. This intersection is not confined to the Bible. Remnants of it can come to you and to me. It is not bottled up by the pages of a scriptural canon. But neither is it to be understood conveniently. Dismissed presumptively.

The Holy Mountain of Sinai is where Peter, James and John presumably are journeying with their master. This is where, in the annals of the Book of Exodus, in the wilderness of Sinai, the Lord God issues the fearsome and startling invitation:

Come up to the LORD, you and Aaron, Nadab, and Abihu, and seventy of the elders of Israel and worship at a distance. Moses alone shall come near the LORD; but the others shall not come near, and the people shall not come up with him.

Come up to the LORD: We need some of this presence. Oh, it is not an easy presence always. But it is what we need. And so Moses and Aaron and Nadab and Abihu and seventy of the elders, that significant number, go up. And the Torah in the Book of Exodus tells us:

and they saw the God of Israel. Under his feet there was something like a pavement of sapphire stone, like the very heaven for clearness. God did not lay his hand on the chief men of the people of Israel; also they beheld God and they ate and drank.

This is one of several units of tradition dealing with the giving of the Law to Moses in which the giving of the Law is surrounded by a Covenant framework to which the people commit themselves. Israel remains camped at Sinai in Exodus for years. And Moses...? When it comes to a bold encounter with the Holy One, Moses waits for six days before going up into the cloud.

And now the disciples are heading up towards the Cloud, the Mystery.

Did they understand the ramifications, the allusive power of the mountaintop? I imagine that they spoke of it later with great reverence. Moses represents the giving of the law. Elijah is associated with the entire prophetic tradition of Israel. And Peter, appropriately enough, is terrified.

The cloud is associated with the giving of the Law and the claiming of a wandering people by the God of Abraham, Issac and Jacob. The cloud comes and

overshadows them all. And then they hear it, directly from the cloud, they hear the voice: *This is my son, the Beloved; listen to him.*

Forget about Moses and the Law. Forget about Elijah and the chariots of fire-- Elijah and the prophets. Forget about the symbolism of Jesus' clothes becoming dazzling white. Forget about the six days that brings us back to the original Covenant event. Forget even about the journey up and the journey down, the meaning of mountains. Just stay with the voice from heaven. The voice that issues the only commandment heaven that Mark references in his entire Gospel. And it is simple: *This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him.*

This is my Son. The scholar Clifton Black of Princeton Seminary points out that this term in Hebrew scripture has resonance: *The nation Israel was sometimes characterized as God's sons (Exodus 4...; Jeremiah 31...; Hosea 1). Israel's king was ceremonially regarded as "Son of God" (2 Samuel 7; Psalm 2). [Even] Caesar Augustus was acclaimed divi filius, "deified son" (Suetonius, The Divine Augustus). [But] If Mark's witness is credible, if God reckons Jesus alone as "the beloved Son," then no one else qualifies.* Black states boldly: "In Mark no one else is designated 'God's Son.' Not Moses. Not Elijah. Not John the baptizer. None of Galilee's other itinerant preachers or exorcists ... Only Jesus is the beloved (*agapetos*) Son."

Who is Jesus for us? In his commentary on this moment beyond understanding Black lays down a marker -- a marker that might have us as well saying *I believe, help my unbelief*. He says: "It's easy to regard Jesus as a sage, hero, scamp, or fool. ... Mark

9:2-9 uncages a Jesus so tamed." And then he challenges the church: "If Jesus is nothing more than an oddball Jew from antiquity, to whom does the church bear witness? If the church has so little to confess, why on earth are we here [mine]?"

Why are we here? Part of the answer to that question comes in the direct command that we and the disciples receive from the cloud on that mountaintop. Surrounded by glory, filled up with terror, the disciples hear the direct command: Listen to him.

That's why we're here. We are here to turn aside from the commonplace and the ordinary, from the routine, from the demands and the schedules and the long-range plans and the short-term goals, from all manner of entertainments, from all of it, this thing we call life. Here to turn aside from all of it and instead in a moment of quietness, a moment perhaps in the car with the radio off, in the early morning hours in the silences of our homes, in moments of sudden crisis or in comforting moments of community, in moments of prayer and in moments at the altar --- wherever---we are to turn aside and to listen, to strain for the presence of Jesus who is the Word. We are to listen to him.

Einstein once wrote: ***The fairest thing we can experience is the mysterious. It is the fundamental emotion which stands at the cradle of true art and true science. He who knows it not and can no longer wonder, no longer feel amazement, is as good as dead. A snuffed-out candle.***

Somewhere before us, in the very fabric of life, there is mystery waiting for us. As Christians we would see Jesus in this mystery, the very Beloved Son of the Holy Father.

And we are commanded to wait and to listen. *Are we listening?* Igor Stravinsky said, “To listen is an effort, and just to hear is no merit. A duck hears also.”

We listen by stopping. We listen by learning to be empty and open. We listen by reading and contemplating the witness of Jesus, the Word. To believe in Jesus is not an easy task nor has it ever been something of ease.

We are here to listen and to be claimed. To listen and to respond to any summons that persists in calling us to move towards compassion, towards praise, towards love, towards reconciliation, towards repentance, towards forgiveness, towards prayer.

Lent is just ahead. And he calls us in so many ways. Even in Mark he calls us in so many ways:

- . “Follow me” (Mark 1).
- “Pay attention to what you hear” (Mark 4).
- “Do not be afraid, only believe” (Mark 5).
- “You give them something to eat” (Mark 6).
- “It is what comes out of a person that defiles” (Mark 7).
- “Deny [yourself] and take up [your cross] and follow me” (Mark 8).
- “Whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all” (Mark 10).
- “Whenever you stand praying, forgive, if you have anything against anyone” (Mark 11).

Listen to him. Today we hear it from the cloud on a mountaintop.

In the name of God -- Father, Son, and Holy Spirit!