

Transfiguration Sunday

February 19, 2012

Text:

Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and John, and led them up a high mountain apart, by themselves. And he was transfigured before them, and his clothes became dazzling white, such as no one on earth could bleach them. And there appeared to them Elijah with Moses, who were talking with Jesus. (Mark 9:2-4)

Discussion:

This text presents two "statement of fact" which are problematic for the "scientific" point of view. The appearance of Jesus mysteriously changes, and the long-dead prophets Elijah and Moses reappear (and talk). How can we understand such things? In recent weeks, we've weighed the possibility that events described as miraculous (healing) could possibly be in some way natural phenomena misidentified by their witnesses. However, this story leaves us no such rationalization. The "hard sciences" (physics, chemistry, biology) include no plausible mechanism for either. We might imagine an unusual weather condition, in which a shaft of sunshine breaks through a layer of cloud to illuminate a small patch of ground where Jesus stood apart from the disciples, but this doesn't seem like the sort of event worth recording. And anyway, this supposition does not account for the presence of Elijah and Moses.

Our discussion group considered the possibility that the described events occurred only in the consciousness of the disciples, rather than in objective fact. If a disciple had tried to photograph the event, would the camera have captured the image? But if not, does it matter? Whether God creates luminosity in the person and garments of Jesus or in the visions of his friends, either way is outside the realm of science.

The disciples offer to construct shelters (or tents) for Jesus, Elijah, and Moses, but Jesus forbids it. Perhaps if they had done so, some remnant would remain for archeology to discover! But they did not, so all we have is the evidence of the story.

Considering the soft sciences of psychology and sociology, how did this story affect the behavior of the disciples? We know that Jesus' ministry grew, and these representatives of the greater group of disciples must have found it to be inspiring. As we'll see on Easter, though, it was not enough to overcome their feeling of defeat at the Crucifixion.