

Not Knowing What He Said

As is the case with sausage and legislation, it's often not wise to be present at the making of a sermon. When I was younger, I dreamed of composing sermons in a book-lined study. I pictured myself wearing an old cardigan with patches at the elbows, a trusty Labrador retriever asleep by the wood fire. Occasionally I would rise from my mahogany desk to gaze through the casement windows at the well-tended garden of the manse.

Sermons produced in that setting would be thoughtful, polished, erudite – even publishable!

As it has turns out, the process is more like a wrestling match – much like Jacob's encounter with the angel at the ford of the River Jabbok. I tussle with the text. It puts me in a hammer lock. I holler "Uncle!" It refuses to let me go.

This week that match took place in a room at the Holiday Inn in Kansas City, where everything's up to date. I was there as a member of the Tallahassee Community Chorus which was performing for the annual conference of the American Choral Directors' Association.

Even away from home, I found today's text particularly quarrelsome. You'd think that, after confronting Luke's version of the Transfiguration every three years for the past 39, I'd have it pinned to the mat, but God's word never works that way. The text yields only as the Spirit blows, and the Spirit "serves no wine before its time."

So, after climbing up that mountain with Jesus, Peter, James and John for yet another year, and after waiting . . . and waiting . . . and waiting for Jesus to finish his prayer, my eyes grew heavy and my head began to nod. I found myself leaning against Peter's shoulder just for a moment or two. There was the faint aroma of fish. Then I heard the voices.

“Now, about your exodus,” Moses was saying to Jesus. “My advice is, stay up here on this mountain. Here you’re close to the Most High God. You’re far away from those ingrates down below, who will neither understand nor appreciate all you do for them.

“Believe me, Jesus, I know. I spent 40 days and 40 nights at the top of a mountain just like this one, receiving the law of God. I put it on two stone tablets and was bringing it down to the people to show them how much God loved them and wanted them to live the lives for which God created them.

“But before I got halfway down the mountain, Jesus, I could hear the ruckus. They were whooping and dancing around the statue of the calf-god -- behaving as though they never heard of a Covenant People. After all the Holy One had done to bring them out of slavery in Egypt, after showing me how to lead them across the Red Sea with Pharaoh’s army hot on our heels. After giving them water to drink and food to eat and staying with us through every footsore step of our journey – they turned their back on the Holy One.

“Don’t go back down that mountain, Jesus. That’s the mistake I made. I died before I could cross the Jordan and step foot in the Promise Land. They speak well enough of me now, but they didn’t when I was with them.

“You never heard such belly-aching. ‘We’re thirsty! We’re hungry! We’re tired of eating doves. We’re tired of eating manna.’ Gripe, gripe, gripe the whole day long.

“They aren’t called ‘the *children* of Israel’ for nothing. Stay up here, Jesus. Don’t go back.”

Then Elijah spoke. He had a deep, rumbling bass voice that would have frightened the daylights out of me, if I had been fully awake. It was easy to imagine the prophets of Baal trembling at the sound of that voice.

“If you do go down, Jesus, don’t go to Jerusalem. That place is death to a prophet. Jerusalem kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to them. You know that. You’ve told your disciples as much, for all the good it did.

“Moses is right. Those people don’t appreciate what you’re doing for them. They’re as stiff-necked and stubborn as they were back in our day.

“Look at them, Jesus. Asleep on the job. Why did you bother to call this crew in the first place? Peter belongs back home gutting fish. The same goes for James and John.

“And as for that other one, the one who fell asleep at the computer screen in the motel room trying to write his precious sermon – he’s the worst of the lot. Week after week he climbs into that pulpit in Tallahassee and presumes to preach the Word of God, when you and I know he’s no closer than any of the rest of them to knowing and doing God’s will. He’s a fake, a cipher, a fraud.”

“Well, Elijah,” Jesus said, “I can see why you were so effective as a prophet. You certainly don’t mince words. And I’ll grant you, they’re not much – especially the one snoozing in the Holiday Inn. But I chose them and they’re mine. If you’re honest, you’ll recall that you had some pretty rough periods in your own life.

“Don’t laugh, Moses! So did you!

“Remember when the people turned on you and you called upon the Lord to save your life? God didn’t give up on you then, any more than he gave up on the rest of his chosen ones.

“And you, Elijah. Remember how you went off to sulk after the great contest on Mount Carmel? You curled up under a broom tree and prayed to God to end your life. God did not forsake you then. Why should I forsake God’s people now?

“I must go back. I must bring the kingdom into their world. Like you, Moses, I’ll give them the law, but I will write it on their hearts. I will teach them to love God and their neighbor as themselves. And like you, Elijah, I will be a prophet to them.

“But I will do more than *tell* them. I will *show* them. Instead of offering that sacrifice to God, as you did, I will *be* that sacrifice. I will be God’s word broken on a cross, God’s love shed like the blood of the paschal lamb. I will be their Passover, even though they turn their backs on me. I will be their Savior, even when they shout, ‘Crucify him!’

“I’m going back,” said Jesus. “I must. For this I came into the world. My exodus will be my death and my resurrection.”

At this point, Peter stirred. Whether he had been awake all along, I do not know. He jumped up and started talking nonsense about building three booths.

“It’s a good thing we’re here!” he told the Master.

He was still rattling on when a cloud blew over the mountain and the damp mist covered us, clinging like a shroud. Then I heard a voice sweeter and stronger than any voice on earth, saying, “**This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!**”

It must have been then that I woke up. The Gospel of Luke was still open on my desk and the computer screen had gone blank. It was almost time to put on my tux and get on the bus to go to the performance hall.

Everything was back to normal. Or was it?

So, friends, I’m afraid there will be no sermon today. What can I say about this strange, wonderful, fearful story, as much dreamed as it is told, more to be felt that it is to be preached?

Somehow, some way in the mystery of God’s grace, Jesus was God’s own Son, God’s own Chosen, who came down off that mountain and went to Jerusalem for us and for our salvation.

And somehow, some way, in the mystery of God’s grace, we are called to follow him.