

DON'T TELL ANYBODY

Exodus 24: 12-18
February 28, 1990

Matthew 17: 1-9
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This is the age of the micro-chip and the computer; science and reason. Mystery is the enemy and we have x-rays to see beyond the surface of mystery. Morton Kelsy said we live in a time of "reduced awareness" of any "non-physical experience." (p. 83) Modernity is not receptive to those persons who claim to have had some dramatic mystical experience. We pass these people off as being "weird" or just "touched in the head." In this psychological culture, we might suggest they see a therapist. Yet, there have been some very practical scientific achievers who were open to the mystical and the supernatural.

One of the most practical of the 15th century was Blaise Pascal. He invented the adding machine, the wheelchair and developed the theory of probability. He wrote a textbook on geometry and two important works on the philosophy of mathematics and science. But this gifted philosopher was an unhappy man. He lacked real meaning in his life until the night of November 23, 1654. According to the *Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, on that night he had a "profound religious experience." This mystical experience transformed him from a sad man into a happy man. After this experience, he wrote: "If man is not made for God, why is he happy only in God?"

We know very little about Pascal's transformative mountain top experience. That is a secret. Ironically, secrecy appears to be a dynamic in Pascal's story and in the New Testament passage that was read. So for this morning's reflection, I want to play with the dynamics which bring spiritual experience and secrecy together.

I. MOUNTAIN TOP EXPERIENCE AND KEEPING A SECRET

I must admit to you that the structure of this sermon resembles a mountain lion running through the mountains. You don't know which rock he is going to jump onto next. In fact, I want to begin with Jesus' statement to Peter, James and John as they were coming down off the mountain rather than their experience on the mountain.

A. These three disciples have just had the mystical experience of a lifetime. They were personally introduced to Moses and Elijah. God even spoke to them out of a cloud, the symbol of his presence.

It's ironic that after such a moving experience, Jesus surprises these privileged disciples with the instruction, "Don't tell anybody." They couldn't tell anybody until after the resurrection. The disciples probably couldn't believe what they were hearing. Their skin was still crawling up their backs and their hair was sticking up like a flattop; and Jesus said, "Don't tell anybody." I can imagine one of the more outspoken responding

with "What do you mean, we can't tell anybody? Can't we even share our experience with the other disciples?"

This meant that when they rejoined the other disciples they couldn't share their powerful experience. We can further speculate that the other disciples were curious about their experience on the mountain. They probably asked, "What happened on the mountain?" Peter, James and John just mumbled something about a birthday party with lights, smoke and candles. What would we have said? Would we be able to keep such an experience a secret?

B. When someone shares a juicy little story with us, they usually end the story with the instruction; "Don't tell anybody." The energy from that secret information just swells the psyche like a balloon.

In a large church such as this, communication is a problem. The Women's Fellowship is hosting a "Ladies Night Out" on Tuesday, February 27th, at 6:00 PM. Advertising has been in *The Congregationalist* for weeks. Posters, giving specific details have been placed at two building entrances. But, I can almost guarantee that someone will hear about the great time had by all, and remark as to why wasn't there any advertising about this event; they would have loved to have attended.

Now, on the other hand, if there is a juicy little tidbit of gossip that is shared between just two people in a back room and one says to the other, "Don't tell anybody," that little bit of information will spread like wildfire. I often wondered if we shouldn't change the name of *The Congregationalist* to *Don't Tell Anybody*. Maybe we could get the word out.

God created us with a natural curiosity to want to discover things. When it comes to juicy information, our radar antennas work overtime. Russia and the United States have routinely placed orbiting satellites to collect secrets from each other. The news media appears more interested in uncovering some sensational gossip than world affairs. I didn't realize that marital discord could sell so many newspapers and even claim so much time on the national news. If the media would leave the Trumps alone, maybe they could work out their problems. Some things should be kept secret. Ironically, it's secrets which spread like wildfire, while the "good news" spreads like molasses in a Wisconsin winter.

C. Jesus obviously realized that human beings have this weakness when he instructed the disciples, "Don't tell anybody." But he had to give the disciples this instruction before they came down off the mountain. Such an event had to have created powerful psyche energy in the disciples. What Jesus was saying was don't waste time in idle talk reminiscing about this beautiful event. Hoard that energy and use it when the right time comes.

There is a practical lesson in His instruction. Many times, boards or committees conceive a grand vision for the development of some program.

In any new church program, there has to be adequate planning. We worry about the success of any new adventure so we bounce ideas off other church members. Much conversation is generated about the new program. But what is the result of a lot of idle talk. The energy and enthusiasm dissipates and the new program dies in committee. Jesus laid out a principle for building God's kingdom of love. Fresh dreams and visions need to be kept secret until the proper time to share.

II. THE MOUNTAIN TOP MYSTICAL EXPERIENCE

If you are still with me, I want to move on to reflect on this mystical experience of the disciples. In this passage, not only is keeping secret important but the secret itself. This vision is too important to take lightly or talk about in idle conversation.

A. As you know, the story begins on a mountain. It appears that anytime God speaks to human beings it is on a mountain. As Jesus is speaking to the disciples, he was transfigured before them. God even spoke from a bright cloud with a pronouncement of blessing: "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased; listen to Him." Rudolf Otto describes the disciples and this experience of "awe." Their souls were "held speechless" and they trembled "inwardly to the farthest fiber" of their beings. (p.17)

Now, I think I know what you are thinking. You want me to explain all that in some kind of rational way. Did Jesus' garments really change or was that a figment of their imagination? Was the cloud made up of water droplets or was it more like smoke from a campfire? Was God's voice audible or what? Did the disciples have too much communal wine or had they been chewing on loco-weed. I am not certain. I am certain that God somehow pulled back the veil and allowed human beings to see his glory, face to face.

B. Human beings can be real strange sometimes. While we blab about juicy secrets, we rarely share our mystical experiences. Some of you have had powerful mystical experiences. You sensed power of the holy as you stood at the bed of a loved one as they breathed their last breath. Others have had visions and revelatory dreams. Carl Jung told of an "out of body" experience in his book, "Memories, Dreams and Reflections." The co-founder of Alcoholics Anonymous, while praying for the healing of his addiction, said that "Suddenly the room lit up with a great white light. I was caught up in an ecstasy which there are no words to describe." We are reluctant to share them, not because we are hoarding the energy. Either we are embarrassed, or we think we are losing our minds, or we fear that others might think we are losing our minds.

While I was doing chaplaincy training in a hospital in North Carolina, there was a neuro-surgeon that was mean as a mountain lion with briars in all four paws. There is no other way to describe him. We were told that when you encountered Dr. Jones, particularly on the

elevator, don't speak unless he speaks to you. (Too close quarters.) We don't know what changed him, but he was transformed almost overnight. He began to greet patients and their families warmly and even asked for the chaplains' names. The chaplain supervisor discovered that Dr. Jones had even become very active in his church. We never knew what happened to change him. It was a secret that needed to be kept until the right time to share.

C. Not everybody has such powerful transforming experiences as Pascal or the co-founder of Alcoholics Anonymous. We must deeply desire such a spiritually renewing experience. A professor of mine said that alcohol and drug addition was at its roots a spiritual problem. Every drunken binge is a seeking for that ultimate high, like the one the disciples experienced on the mountain. You might be aware that satanists are using LSD to promote visions and new ways of getting high. In a desperate attempt to be filled with the spirit, we fill ourselves with spirits. We don't want to go to the trouble to seek a transformative high like the disciples and Pascal, so we try to induce it artificially. For the modern church that is just trying to survive, we have our work cut out for us. People need to experience the mystical in an appropriate way. We have the way to reach into the realm of the spirit. However, most of us want God to come to us; not us to Him.

If we would like to have a mystical experience such as the disciples, then we will have to climb the mountain to God. There is a legend about a tribe which had a wax god located on a cool mountain. But the people grew tired of making the climb up the mountain to worship. So, they brought him down from the mountain to the rear of the village and their wax symbol god melted. Now they had no god. When we bring God down to our level; when we mold him to suit our philosophical ideas, we soon discover we have no God at all. God is not an existentialist, or a socialist or a capitalist. God is spirit. God is spirit and if we want to have a powerful experience with God, then we will need to climb up to the level of the spirit. And that is no secret.

CONCLUSION

Pascal wrote:

"There are three kinds of persons: those who serve God, having found Him; others who are occupied in seeking Him, not having found Him; while the remainder live without seeking Him, and without having found Him. The first are reasonable and happy, the last are foolish and unhappy; those in between are unhappy and unreasonable.

Have you really experienced God's presence? For those who have, you won't have to tell anybody. People will know it by your love. Amen.