

A few weeks ago, I wrote my article in the Chimes about this new way of communicating I've been trying, called a blog, or weblog. A blog is basically an online journal, a place where I can write about how I'm feeling or what's going on in my life, where I can post photos of the plant in my office to show how much it's grown or share some of my favorite quotes, a recipe or a funny thought. Because it's on the internet, anyone who is interested in the same things I write about can search me out and find me...can read my journal and even comment on what I say in it. I've been keeping this journal for about 6 weeks, and in that time I've written about our new worship service, a movement looking at the past and future of the church called "emergent", what it means to me to be a pastor, and even about my grandmother and why I like to crochet.

On Valentine's Day I wrote on the blog that I had not been taking good care of myself and that I'd become too busy—doing all manner of important work, but not caring for myself in the process. I reaffirmed my commitment to use the blog as a kind of spiritual discipline, a check-up about my life and priorities and health. It wasn't even exactly what I meant to say, but it was open and honest and maybe even a little raw. I never expected to hear a response, but I got one Friday morning—from someone who identifies himself as "John Wesley."

Now this is not just someone whose name happens to be the same as the founder of our Methodist denomination. No, this is an individual who has created a persona based on Mr. Wesley. His blog posts are dated early in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, and as near as I can figure, he is doing two things: reposting some of John Wesley's journal entries (270 years later) and also reflecting on our modern world from John Wesley's perspective. In my case, he exhorted me to take care of my physical and mental health so that I might better serve God.

John Wesley is an institution, literally, for United Methodists. We name children and churches after him, we celebrated the 300<sup>th</sup> anniversary of his birth recently, we quote his words and try to live out his principles every day. It would be easy to make a monument of Mr. Wesley, some fixed image, carved in stone and frozen in time...to make of him an idol instead of living out the faith and disciplined life to which he calls us. It would be a simple thing to entomb his vision and teaching and mission into some fixed structure that we could visit, and photograph, and leave behind, but instead we people called Methodist are charged to daily practice what Mr. Wesley taught us, serving God and others in our present time out of the wisdom and inspiration given us so long ago, to keep his vision and his faith alive in us.

The people of the Exodus, the slaves to Egypt set free by God under the leadership of Moses, were looking for a way out from their wandering. They complained about pretty much everything: we have no homes here, at least in Egypt we had shelter. We have no food here, at least in Egypt we had plenty to eat. We don't know how to live here, at least in Egypt Pharaoh's expectations and punishments were clear; work or die. Moses asked God for help to transform these people that had been freed from bondage, and didn't know what it meant to be free.

Do you remember this one? First, Moses went up the mountain amid the cloud of God and God's voice like thunder, and came down with the word of God on stone tablets, only to find that a golden calf had been made in his absence, a substitute God that was easier to understand and less demanding than the one who'd set them free. That little statue was less threatening than this God of plagues and Passover angels, of wilderness wandering and manna. The calf could be seen and touched, its behavior was predictable (it just sat there), it made no demands that could make anyone uncomfortable...and it offered no hope, no help, no salvation. Moses destroyed the calf and again climbed the mountain and met God there, to receive again the instructions that would make a people and a

nation out of the rabble he'd led out of captivity. In the process, Moses' face was transformed, transfigured, by the glory of God in their meetings.

In our gospel lesson, we meet Moses again, with Elijah, again on a mountain in the presence of God. This time it's Jesus who has gone up on the mountain to pray, with three of the disciples, and Moses and Elijah appear beside him. Jesus' countenance and clothing are changed, God speaks, and the world changed...and Peter was there. Oh, Peter.

Peter meant well. He always does. He doesn't think too much about what he's about; he gets hold of a piece of knowledge and it changes him...for better or worse. In today's gospel lesson, Peter has another of these epiphanies, these flashes of knowledge and understanding, these transforming moments: when Moses and Elijah appeared at the side of Jesus, something amazing was happening, and he didn't want to forget it.

We don't know exactly what Peter thought was happening there on that mountaintop. Some say he thought that Moses and Elijah's appearance placed Jesus at the same level as these great men of the faith, whom tradition says did not die like mere mortals, but ascended bodily to heaven due to their great righteousness. Others say Peter saw their appearance as kind of a super Sukkoth or festival of booths, a reminder of God's care for his people during the Exodus, and so he suggested erecting

tents or tabernacles, temporary shelters to honor that feast of wilderness wandering and saving grace. Maybe he just wanted everyone to be comfortable, and hoped that providing accommodations would make everyone stay a little longer, so he could see Jesus, whom he knew to be the Messiah, in the presence of these icons of the Law and the prophets.

I don't know for sure, but I think Peter may have had something else in mind. I think Peter was overwhelmed and excited by the appearance of Moses and Elijah, by the changes he saw in Jesus as his clothes shone white and his face glowed with the glory of God. I think Peter, impulsive, occasionally brilliant, often thick-headed Peter knew that God was doing something incredible and world-changing right there on that mountaintop...and he wanted a way to remember it, to invite others to come and see the place where it happened, to visit it again and again to ponder its meaning. I think Peter may have wanted to freeze that moment in time, to preserve and protect it, so that others could see what he had seen. I think Peter may have succumbed to the very human temptation to build a monument to this extraordinary God-event, to mark the spot.

We'll never know what Peter really meant to do, because God intervened in the form of a voice from Heaven, telling us who Jesus really is: this is the beloved son of God, pleasing to God. We know this story as

the transfiguration, the transformation, and we celebrate on this, the last Sunday of the season of Epiphany. Eric reminded us weeks ago, at the beginning of this season after Christmas, of what an epiphany is: a revelation, a sudden knowing, what I like to call an “a-ha” moment. Peter’s epiphany, his “a-ha” moment, was interrupted by the voice...and I believe that for this church, this interruption was a very good thing.

I think Peter wanted to erect tents to create a place where he and the disciples could enjoy, remember and revisit the transformation of Jesus Christ and the visit from Moses and Elijah. He wanted to create a memorial, a monument, to the great work of God he had seen in that day and place and time. He wanted to share his experience with others, and it was a kind of tradition among the Jewish people that when they had had these kinds of God-experience, they would leave behind a monument, a pillar or standing stone, to mark the place where God had been among them. It was a natural thought for Peter, but also a wrong one.

The problem with erecting monuments to great moments in history is that they are too easy to walk away from. We go to Washington DC and are so familiar with the sight of the Washington Monument that we barely even notice it. How many of us remember the words from the Jefferson Memorial or the FDR Memorial? I remember walking around, reading the

inscriptions and feeling awed by the sense of history...but I can't tell you what I read, or exactly what I saw, except for one thing: my mother remembered reading about FDR's Scotty dog Fala, and pointed out to us one place where Fala was memorialized there in stone with everything else.

We erect monuments with the best of intentions: that we may not forget the lessons of the past, to remember those who performed great works on our behalf, to honor and share our strong feelings about a person, a place, and event. We mean well, just as Peter did. But all too often our efforts to create a permanent reminder of some important truth succeed only in creating not a shrine but a tomb, where the good we have tried to remember become dry and lifeless...something to visit on a school trip, and then walk away from. And sometimes, like the wandering exiles in the desert, our efforts reduce great events, God-moments, transfigurations into manageable, tame golden calves that we are easier for us to wrap our minds around than this God who does such strange and wonderful things, who demands our lives and gives back eternity.

Our temptation is to do exactly what Peter suggested: to take a moment when God is miraculously present among us, when some great thing has been done, when we have witnessed the power and glory of God,

and to create a permanent, fixed memorial: somewhere where we can go to remember when God did something here. But instead the power and glory of God that we sometimes get hold of here in this place calls us not to create a dead, dry, lifeless monument to our faith, but to live our faith, to grow it, to accept the challenge and change that God calls us to and to keep it alive in us, not leave it behind safely entombed on a mountaintop where it won't call us to be uncomfortable, to change, to love with the powerful and terrible love of God.

It happens, folks, in every place where people sense God moving: we then fear that the only way God can move is that exact way, and so we have to duplicate it. It is said that the seven last words of the church are “we’ve never done it that way before”—that we can only find God working in the same predictable comfortable ways we always know. But when we do that, we erect a monument to what God has done...and distance ourselves from what God is doing. In the same way, when we latch onto every new movement, every success story, and try to duplicate it in this setting, we are enshrining someone else’s experience without learning from it what God has for us, here, where we are.

And when we make of our success a monument, we fail to understand what God gives us life, and breath, and success in ministry for.

What the church is, is not a building. What the church is, is not stained glass or an historic sanctuary. What the church is, is not a pipe organ or great music program (sorry, Kandice and Joe). What the church is, is not programs and events and classes and mission projects, bulletins and meetings and services. What the church is, is a people of God, living together with the calling to keep the work of God alive in this place. What the church is, is a group of Christians who keep alive in our hearts and actions what it means to see Jesus transfigured on the mountaintop...who live out God's glory and power in this world, even as we know that we are truly in the world, but not of it, and working to bring heaven into reality here and now for all people.

When an event becomes a defining moment for any people, the obvious and natural tendency is to do exactly what Peter suggests, exactly what you or I might do: to create a monument to that event, with the best of intentions. We desire not to forget the impact of that event on our lives. We mean to be inspired to continue in the changes that event makes in us. We intend to create a space where others can share our moment, to experience it as we have. But all too often we create a tomb, where past glories are enshrined and we can get a little distance from God's power and might. When Christians enshrine God's power to change lives and hearts

in conversion, for example, we make a little god of the question: “when were you saved? Can you tell me the details?” And then no one without the “right” answer has the “right” experience...we make God in our image instead of being made over in God’s image.

Our lives as Christians, as people of faith, as God-followers who have been changed, transformed, transfigured by the power of God leave us with one way to live: as though the love and grace of God were a spring of living water, coursing through us, with the power to wear down the standing stones we have erected to our own successes and to confine our own epiphanies. And then what the church is, is living water, washing the goodness of heaven and the compassion of Christ into a world that has more experience with hard stone than flowing life. What the church is, is the people of God bound only by God’s love and a desire to live their faith. What the church is, dear friends, is us: alive in faith, in ministry, and in Christ. Thanks be to God.