“Fantastic Questions”

A sermon by The Rev. Rachel Wildman

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The Transfiguration

This morning we’ve had the privilege of being invited into not just one wild story about the physical experience of encountering God, but two! In our modern ears, we often reduce these stories to the instructions given in the clouds. With all of the wondrously rich scientific understandings we have over our biblical counterparts, we skip over the most challenging questions raised by the physical experiences, themselves, and settle into the “logical” conclusions about what these stories counsel us to “do.”

But, according to one scholar, at least our Gospel passage today--the Transfiguration of Jesus—is of the literary genre known as fantastical[[1]](#footnote-1)…it is in the family of science fiction or speculative fiction, a genre that transports us to a time or experience outside of what is currently reality in order to raise challenging questions that, if asked directly, might be too threatening for us to actually engage.

Speculative fiction has been used by black writers as “protest” fiction for decades. “Afrofuturism” as it is often referred to, reclaims and presents the black experience, including the oppression so inherent for black Americans. However, because it is set in contexts or uses characters outside the realm of reality (like the use of superheroes in the *Black Panther* movie), it attracts massive white audiences. Many in these audiences would be unwilling or incapable of hearing the black experience directly, and yet are still left with disturbing questions about their own complicity in racism and oppression.

Similarly, through speculative fiction like the *Maddaddam Trilogy* by Margaret Atwood, the climate advocacy movement has been successful in getting a wide array of readers to inhabit both the fearsome end results of unabated climate change and the restorative environment that we could create by aggressively tackling climate change. This genre, too, has raised challenging questions for not only climate deniers, but for those of us who look away from the very real changes around us and our participation in them because they are too frightening to sit with.

The Transfiguration, especially in light of its similarities to Moses’ experience on the mountain, is also protest fiction. In the context of the persecution targeting the early, post-resurrection Christian community, it may have been too dangerous, or ineffective, to continue to directly propose Jesus’ identity as the Messiah, one with God, the ultimate Sovereign. So, instead, it is implied, in a reality-bending tale that includes not only the Law (Moses) and the Prophets (Elijah), but God’s supposed voice from the clouds.

Although we are in a very different context now, both Moses’ experience up on the mountain and Jesus’ Transfiguration can still serve to raise uncomfortable questions that we might not otherwise engage.

Moses is summoned by God to the mountain…deep in the cloud for 40 days. The cloud—the Glory of the Lord-- appeared like fire to the Israelites waiting down below. In the subsequent chapters, God speaks and speaks to Moses, issuing countless instructions for how the Israelites should be in relationship with God, eventually resulting in the holy tablets—the 10 commandments.

And then Jesus and three of his disciples are, again, up on a mountain, having a physical experience of God ….Jesus’ physical appearance shifts into a dazzling, brilliant white, shining like the sun. Moses and Elijah, long dead, appear, seemingly in the flesh. And the divine voice again issues an instruction—this time not a series of practices but just one—to listen to Jesus—God’s embodied voice and presence in the world.

These are awe-filled, mystical stories of physically encountering God. Although the argument that they are fantastical in genre implies that they are fictional, they *are* about the spiritual realm, which is inherently mysterious. As such, they raise questions about whether they **could** conceivably happen, even if these particular events didn’t actually happen. These are hard questions that strike at both the center of our inner spiritual lives and at the center of our collective practice of the Christian faith….questions that might feel too countercultural to propose directly to one another in an every day conversation.

They are about how we understand the spiritual world, and how it may or may not interact with our earthly lives. Although seemingly disconnected from how we live our lives, the answers we hold for them, whether consciously or unconsciously, do impact our lived experiences. Seriously wrestling with them is important in boldly and confidently claiming our spiritual and religious lives and the people they invite us to be.

Like, is Jesus actually the Messiah that the Jewish faith and its scriptures heralded, or are the similarities between Moses and Jesus, for example, largely fabricated by the Gospel writers in order to make that argument? If they’re fabricated, does that change our commitment to the way of Jesus?

If we believe in resurrection, does that mean that dead people can actually appear? If not, what does resurrection, life-after-death actually mean to us? How does our answer impact how we companion one another at the end of our lives?

Are mystical experiences—visions or voices or events that seem too impossible to actually be coincidence—real? Or are they merely hallucinations? How do we know if they are one or the other? If we’ve had them, is it too risky or shameful to discuss them with each other?

Could the events on the mountains—the 10 commandments…the dazzling face of Jesus—truly be real? If not, who generated the central tenets of our faith and how do we know that they really do represent divine truth worth taking risks for?

PAUSE.

Fantastic questions, indeed.

1. Kim, H.C. Placing Matthew 17:1-13 in the Genre of the Fantastic. *Communio Viatorum* (2007) pp. 19-30. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)