

Feast of the Transfiguration: Luke 9.28-36

August 6, 2023

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Boxes have gotten a bad rap. Metaphorically, we're not supposed to put people in them and we're constantly being told to think outside them. But, in case you haven't noticed, in actual life, boxes are pretty useful. Imagine moving to a new house before the invention of the box. I don't even know how that would work. Would you dump the contents of your kitchen drawers onto bandanas and tie them to the end of sticks like the luggage of a cartoon hobo?

Oh, wait. Drawers are boxes, so you'd have to store your forks differently to begin with. Maybe in your cutlery bottle? Boxes are not only bad or good, you see. They're something of a mixed bag. A mixed bag of boxes. That could be a thing, right?

When our kids were small, we moved several times, the biggest moves being from Arkansas to Virginia for seminary, and then back three years later. Our kids knew from boxes, as they say. The eldest, not happy to be leaving Arkansas, read "Box me up and ship me home" on the side of one about to be loaded into the yellow Penske truck in our driveway. And he said that that's exactly what he wanted us to do once we got to Virginia: box him up and ship him back home to Arkansas. Sometimes boxes were a source of anxiety or sadness, signs of a transition that a child didn't really have much say in.

But each of our kids also had a "special box." I'm not sure just when and how they came to be. But at some point, Ardelle made sure each of them had one. And from then on, when they received a silver dollar from a grandparent, or found a really cool bottle cap or a sparkly rock, it went into the "special box" for safekeeping and, most important, so that the precious thing could be revisited and enjoyed again on some rainy afternoon in the future.

If moving boxes meant disruption and chaos, a child's special box could be just the opposite. It was a lap sized container that held a few mostly useless but glorious things, things fit only for enjoyment and admiration. Why don't we all have special boxes to carry through this life? Or when did we lose them, if we had them once upon a time?

Well, I'm now wondering whether those "special boxes" are what made a soft spot in me for poor old Peter at the Transfiguration.

Peter is infamous as the person in this story who says just the wrong thing at just the wrong time. After Jesus's garments all turn white and a change comes over his face and Moses and Elijah suddenly appear, Peter says, "Master, it is good for us to be

here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah..." After which the narrator adds, with a sigh, I think, "...not knowing what he said."

Peter is that guy. He's the guy sitting next to you at the theater who, just when you've reached a state of total absorption in the show, elbows you in the ribcage and says, "Wow, isn't this great!" Not helpful.

Peter comes off as a bit of a fool. But I hope he's not only a fool. I recognize Peter's impulse to capture a moment and hang onto it too tightly, or to explain how great it is and therefore kill it with self-consciousness. But the wisdom of "special boxes" is real too. The desire to carry around a few nuggets of glory to wonder at isn't all bad, is it? What was the ark of the covenant, if not that? But sometimes I worry that I've got it doubly wrong. Sometimes I worry that I try too desperately to preserve or contain some goodness or even glory that I'm meant to stay fully present to in a moment. And I also worry that I've lost some of a child's capacity to experience wonder all over again when she pulls out the artifact she set aside carefully to evoke it on another day. Both seem like failures of curiosity in a way.

We live in an age that seems to be less obsessed with curiosity than with certainty and rational ways of knowing. I realize that sounds absurd to you. Because we also live in a time in which half of the country thinks the other half has taken leave of their senses completely. We're mystified that a rational person could think such a thing about Jesus or gender, taxes or tariffs, Juneteenth or January 6th. We think that if people would just be reasonable they'd come around to our way of seeing things.

The problem is that we have to collect information and experiences before we have anything to make sense of with our precious reason and rationality. And when we start out with different basic assumptions, because of those different collections of information and experience, well, our way of seeing the world may be internally consistent, but it will be foolishness to someone who begins from another place. We forget this. And so we keep yelling our impeccable logic at our thick headed opponents, as if we'll eventually get through. We're like tourists who don't speak the local language, but think the cab driver will understand us once we turn up the volume on our English high enough.

But I'm no longer sure we can be reconciled to one another until we become curious about one another again. You might call curiosity the everyday form of wonder. It's the space that opens up when we admit what we do not know about this person, or this world, or even about ourselves. Curiosity also requires the patience to wait in that state of ignorance long enough for something outside of ourselves, something we didn't already know or assume, to fill it up. Do you ever wonder what might happen if we traded some of the judgment and certainty in this world for a little more curiosity about what we don't yet understand?

Maybe Peter's booth building project was ill advised only because he tried to start it too soon. He was trying to mark the spot where these three prophets met, but

maybe he needed to stay curious and open because the meeting was still underway. The voice from heaven didn't say stop building. "Listen," is all he was instructed to do.

We probably can also be too quick and too certain in our dismissal of Peter's booth building project. He didn't know what he was saying, we're told. Sure. But neither did anybody else. That's the point, right? The others were rubbing the sleep from their eyes and watching Jesus's clothing go dazzling white as a couple of long dead prophets show up for a chat. Yeah, they didn't say anything, which might have been marginally better than Peter's blabbering on. But they didn't know what to say either.

And maybe at some point soon thereafter, once he'd seen and heard and experienced all that God had for him to stay present to in a state of slack-jawed wonder, maybe in a little while it wouldn't have been wrong at all to build three special boxes to return to. Three booths he could climb back up to and revisit on a day when the world seemed emptier of magic and God seemed silent and far away.

On this particular Founders Day, I may feel especially inclined to cut dear old Peter a little slack, because our own special box for glory next door is in a state of deconstruction. I can identify with his desire to build something worthy of what you've seen and experienced in a place where God has come near. I can identify with his reverence for the great tradition of prophets and faithful people extending back across time, the tradition that still shapes and grounds and challenges you to come more fully alive to both the glory and to the needs present to your life today. But faithfulness to what Peter had seen required something other than enclosing and preserving the past in little houses. Maybe what God wanted was a little more of Peter's attention, his openness to what might be, his curiosity about what was happening right then and right there among God and the people he could see from where he stood.

And so it is with us perhaps. If, rather than creating a space in which you and I might be more open and alert to God's glory, to one another, and to the stranger in our midst, if we were to build a place that is only a shrine to another time, we wouldn't be faithful to Jesus or to the people who passed down the glory box that is Calvary to us. But if we, like the people on the mountain that day, make a space where our beautiful, flawed, complicated history can actually be what asks us not to rush to act until we have listened to Jesus with curiosity and wonder, transfigurations are still possible.

Of course God's glory can't be housed. You can't package it up for safekeeping or later consumption. But the Church, in her strange old wisdom, did box up this story in scripture for us to open up and wonder at together, even at the remove of all these years. And maybe if we simply open it and enjoy the gift of being given this place, this moment, this eclectic group of God's people to share it with ... well, we may not know what we're saying. But, if we stay curious and quiet long enough to hear what Jesus actually has to say to us, "Lord, it is good for us to be here," might not be the least faithful way to respond.