

Sermon: “The Gospel according to Curious George”

September 30, 2007. - Paula Pryce-Digby

Mark 9:2-13

In the name of God, Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer

The Transfiguration story, which we heard from the Gospel of Mark today, tells of an exceptional encounter with God: Jesus and three of his disciples have a revelatory experience on a mountain top. When Tricia asked me to consider for this sermon where we see God in our daily lives, I immediately thought of a much more humble venue: the movie theatre.

A year or so ago, I took my daughter Olivia to the movies. To her chagrin, this doesn't happen a lot because movies – even ones written for children – seem to play out our society's neuroses. They all seem full of cynicism and bravado. But that day Olivia and I chose a movie we thought could only be wonderful: Curious George, the little monkey who happily gets into everything. Mischievous, and of course curious, but entirely innocent.

This morning I'd like to explore with you the story we just heard, the Transfiguration, but with the help of the – albeit not canonical – Gospel according to Curious George.

Curious George, as most of you will know, is curious. Curiosity is his Modus Operandi. Even if he tried, he cannot get through the day without being drawn in whole-heartedly by the effervescent colours and sounds of the world around him. His abandon to wonder sometimes gets him into trouble – a lot of trouble. Nevertheless, one can't help but admire his enthusiasm and love of beauty. You could say he is an admirer of God's creation.

In the opening of the movie, Curious George exuberantly explores his jungle home, discovering for example that chameleons change colour in response to their surroundings. What fun! George parades a collection of animals past the poor chameleon, forcing upon him a whirling rainbow of colour change: grey elephant, green crocodile, orange orangutan, striped zebra, round again and again. George's daily life is full of such tricks, each delving into the wonders that are everywhere around him.

But when George comes to America, his companion, the Man with the Yellow Hat, tries to subdue his curiosity. The Man with the Yellow Hat works at a Natural History Museum which is in danger of closing, so he has more important things to do than chase after a monkey who is always getting into fixes. But George will not be contained!

In fact, George is a teacher; he shows the Man with the Yellow Hat what life's really all about. “Forget your worries!” the little monkey seems to say. “There will always be worries! Look at the stars! The flowers! The world around you! Isn't it astonishing?!” George's Gospel teaches us about beauty and love of creation, even if it sometimes gets us into trouble or leads us away from our responsibility. He's a kind of enlightenment guru, showing us the beauty of what is already there, if only we would open our

eyes and hearts to see it. However, the Man with the Yellow Hat is an imperfect disciple: desirous of what is good and right, but not always clear on where or how to find it. The Man with the Yellow Hat is a bungler, someone who hasn't quite grasped George's Gospel of Wonder and Beauty.

Another character, however, is not so pure in his intent. Paul is the museum owner's son. He does not care about the truth and learning which the museum hopes to offer society. Instead he thinks only of his own compulsions, which are greed and a neurotic desire for his father's approval. In fact, Paul wants to tear the museum down to make money on a parking lot, of all things. He is jealous and scheming. Paul's modus operandi is cynical self-preservation.

Between the cynical Paul and the bubbly Curious George, the movie illustrates a deep tension in our society: Do we take the road of wonder (as represented by George) or do we become cynical in response to an imperfect world (as did Paul). The Man with the Yellow Hat is the mediator, trying to pick his way through the extremes to figure out how to live responsibly and well. (I think most of us are a lot like the Man with the Yellow Hat).

But the movie is not sympathetic to the Man with the Yellow Hat's impulse towards responsibility, his need to balance a love of wonder with an awareness of problems in the world. Instead, the movie stubbornly pushes us towards a blind adherence to all things curious and astonishing. Here is where our teacher, George, falls down. A wonder that ignores personal and social need – his gospel of "hey, let's just have fun!" – does not hear the deeper message before us.

Perhaps on the surface it seems obvious: we should seek beauty in the world, and through it God. Beauty shall motivate and sustain us. But what of the lack of beauty in this world? How do we responsibly acknowledge darkness? To ignore it is to be in utter denial of our own unmet needs and the condition of many: There is a war going on in Iraq. Raids in Darfur. Terrible earthquakes first in Peru and then in Indonesia. There is poverty and violence in the streets. There are floods and hurricanes and melting polar sea ice, seemingly the result of our own self-absorbed and short-sighted actions. We appear to be laying out a desperate future for our descendents. And we are expected to seek beauty to motivate and sustain us?

I dare to say YES. Yes – though in a different way from Curious George's lovely but naive embrace of beauty.

That daring 'yes' to wonder and beauty comes not from George's Gospel but from Mark's Gospel. In Mark, we find a canonical version of wonder and beauty: the Transfiguration.

Imagine. Jesus, Peter, James, and John climb the mountain and there something extraordinary happens: Jesus is revealed in his glory. The mountain represents the epitome of wonder. It is not really of this world, but of things Godly. On the mountain top, Jesus dons his heavenly appearance, dazzling and radiant. Then God's great messengers, Elijah and Moses, appear with him. Not only this, Jesus seems to know them personally and is chatting with them when Peter interrupts. "I have a great idea," says Peter. "Let's stay here forever: you Three and us three. Wouldn't life be just fabulous here in the

glow?" If the Transfiguration were part of Curious George's Gospel, Jesus might have said "Sure" and he, Moses, and Elijah might still be on top of the mountain having a great time.

But this is Mark's Gospel. Jesus returns to his normal appearance and though the disciples keep the revelation in their hearts, the fabulous moment is over. So much for Peter's suggestion to build a mountain-top enclave and hang on tight to God's glory.

Today's Gospel reading stops there, but the story does go on. The next part really helps us to understand what the Transfiguration teaches us about wonder and beauty: Jesus strides down the mountain side, while Peter, James, and John are still gasping from having witnessed his mystical transformation. When they arrive to the valley, Jesus begins healing. No hesitation, no regret at leaving the mountain. He's back in the land of the living and ready to go.

Jesus' responses to the mountain and to the valley together teach us how to live in the world. Jesus does not seek beauty for its own sake. He moves rapidly from the mountain-top contemplation of gurus to action in the valley below. By contrast, Peter (and Curious George) would like to indulge themselves in wonder for personal sustenance, to stay atop the mountain forever.

I have to say here, I'm with Peter and George. I get that mountain-top experience and I'd like to set up camp there. There are times when I've gone to the mountain and really did not want to come back. I have been transported and dazzled by the spiritual power that is everywhere around us: at a jazz concert, listening to the crazy squeaks of a soprano saxophone; in the tundra, stumbling upon a nest filled with ptarmigan eggs; in my own bedroom, silently reading Thomas Merton's Seven Storey Mountain. Such ordinary, ordinary things that, from no effort of mine, suddenly cracked open to reveal God's glory. A glory which can fill us to bursting. But then what? What do we do with that bursting energy from God?

I personally feel extremely challenged by this task of transforming wonder into action. I am an academic after all. I like to sit around and think about these things and, like Peter, I like to sit in the glow. But Jesus gives us an imperative in Mark: we must bring God's wonder to others. Luckily, there are some who do know how to make the connection between mountain and valley. Right here at Church of our Redeemer there are many who are models for us: people who actively bring God's energy to earth in the missions to El Hogar, L'Esperanza Academy, Bristol Lodge, the Grow Clinic, to name just a few. And we are grateful to people with that kind of gift. However, some of us struggle to engage in this kind of action. Not all of us are Martin Luther Kings who can lead the Civil Rights Movement. But all of us can in our way bring wonder and love to the world. Imagine, say, if all of us decided to live by the rule of kindness. Simple? Try it in traffic! Not always so simple, but possible to attempt.

Yet there are times when, like the museum owner's son, Paul, we don't feel wonder or an ability to enact it on earth. What of the times when we feel nothing, or worse, we feel despair? Of course we cannot always dictate how we will respond to the world. We can't insist on viewing the world with wonder. We cannot demand to have transformative experiences which will enliven us and make us want to change the world NOW! A dewdrop on a spider web or Choral Eucharist at King's College, Cambridge,

or even the Red Sox winning the World Series might do nothing for us, even if we wish they would. Indeed, life-altering spiritual experiences are a gift from God, and for most of us, a rare gift. Like the museum owner's son, Paul, sometimes we just can't see the beauty for all the darkness that crowds in on us.

But even in that place of blindness, there is something we can do actively. Whether we have extraordinary spiritual experiences or not, whether we feel overwhelmed by the chaotic state of the world or not, we can choose to be open to wonder. This is the good lesson of Curious George. Even though that little monkey George may not have all the sophisticated understandings and concerns about the world that you have, he does have something our cynically-oriented society has in short supply: he has openness. While Curious George falls to wonder effortlessly, we need to come with conscious intention. We can choose to have an active intention to step into the world with open eyes (not in denial of the world's difficulties) and also with open hearts. We can step into the world with the intention of seeing its beauty and also bringing beauty to it.

While all of us doubt and all of us from time to time sink into despair, we can reclaim wonder, even as our society pushes us towards cynicism. Wonder then becomes an act of faith. It allows for deep, even unresolvable, questions, but it remembers that the beauty of God's creation can heal us, sustain us, and motivate us to help bring God's kingdom here on earth. And if we choose this openness to wonder collectively, as a Christian community, then we can trust that someone else in our community will always be bringing the mountain to the valley, even when we ourselves cannot. With this intentional commitment, this act of faith, ours is a collective effort towards both embracing and creating wonder even in an imperfect world.

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