

“Three Kinds of Knowing”

Simon. He was still feeling awful.

There had been that glorious moment

when Jesus had asked the disciples who they thought he was
and while everyone else stood there in silence –

either because they weren't sure or because they were afraid to say –
he had spoken with sudden insight and heartfelt conviction:

“You are the Christ, this son of the living God!”

And Jesus had replied with those amazing words, “Blessed are you, Simon, son of Jonah!

For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven.

And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this Rock I will build my church,
and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it.

I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven,
and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven,
and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.”

In all of his life, he had never felt so affirmed or so appreciated or so loved.

He felt like a little kid

who had done something that had pleased his parents beyond all expectation.

He had felt so close to Jesus,

and at that moment he had felt that Jesus knew him like no one else ever had or ever would.

And at the same time he felt more secure –

as leader of their group, as Jesus' right-hand man, as his #2 – than he had ever felt before.

He had always kind of felt like their leader, but it was never a secure feeling –

more like he was standing before them on top of mound, but a mound made of shifting sand.

After Jesus' words of praise he felt like he was standing on a rock!

He smiled, remembering that that was exactly what Jesus had called him: Rock. Petra. Peter.

And then, it had all fallen apart. He had ruined everything.

Jesus, the one he had identified as the Christ, the Messiah,

the one who would free his people from their enslavement to Rome,
started talking about his DEATH!

He told them that he must go to Jerusalem

& undergo great suffering at the hands of the elders & chief priests & scribes, & be killed!

He was going to be killed?! It made no sense.

And so he, Simon / Jesus' Rock / Peter, had taken Jesus aside –

thank God he had taken him aside and not done this in front of everyone else –
and told him that he was talking crazy.

But instead of being thankful for Peter's well wishes and good advice

and the implied offer of protection, Jesus had yelled at him,

“Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me;

for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.”

And then Jesus had pushed past him and gone back to the others, leaving Peter reeling.

Those words had been like a slap in the face, a punch in his gut, and a knee in his groin –
all at the same time.

He was so shocked

that it was a while before he could take in anything else Jesus was saying to them.

But over the next few days he did hear a lot of talk about taking up a cross & suffering & dying,
and every time he heard those words,

it took him back to that awful moment when he had felt little more than a worm.

That was an ironic image. Satan the snake. Peter the worm.

It wasn't like he hadn't said or done stupid things before,

but when Jesus had praised him, he had thought that was all in the past.

Tears came into his eyes once more and he blinked them away before anyone else could notice.

He just didn't know how to make it right. Didn't know if it would ever be right again.

But then 6 days after that beautiful awful day,

Jesus was asking him and James and John to climb Mt Tabor with him.

Maybe, just maybe, things would go back to the way they had been

before he had screwed everything up.

At least he could hope.

As they climbed, though, he was still wrestling with what had happened.

How could Jesus' dying be a good thing? How could he be blamed for not wanting Jesus to die?

He just couldn't make sense of it.

And it made him wonder if maybe Jesus wasn't the Christ after all.

Maybe he wasn't even sane.

Maybe Jesus wasn't the one Peter had come to believe he was.

They had reached the top and it was a good thing

because although his legs and lungs felt fine, his brain felt as if it had just climbed 4 miles!

It was time to let it go.

He'd continue to follow Jesus – for a while – but from an emotional distance.

He had his doubts now –

about who Jesus was, about this trip to Jerusalem, about this suffering and dying stuff,
about everything.

He'd just have to wait and see what happened.

And then all of the sudden there was Jesus –

transfigured before them, his face shining like the sun, and his clothes dazzling white!

And suddenly there appeared Moses and Elijah, talking with him.

And all of the sudden, Peter knew just like he had known 6 days before,

knew with all his heart and soul and mind and strength, knew with every fiber of his being,

that Jesus was the Messiah, the Christ –

not just the one who would save Israel,

but the one in whom he, Simon Peter, would find saving.

He, in all his brilliant insight and blind stupidity,

he who could be a rocky foundation or a stumbling stone,

he with all his God-given potential & all his human failures – he would find saving in Jesus.

In that moment he felt just as he had when he had first confessed Jesus as the Christ –
in a place of complete belonging and acceptance and grace, a place of peace and hope and joy,
a place where no regret of the past and no fear of the future could intrude
on this present moment of light and life and love.

This was the second time he had experienced such beauty, such rapture, such delight!

He never ever wanted to leave. “Let’s stay here. Please, Jesus! I’ll build us shelter.

I’ll do anything if only we can stay in this place, in this time, here, and now, forever...”

And all of the sudden there was no need for shelter

because a shimmering glowing cloud surrounded him, engulfing him,

wrapping him in the divine arms,

and his Divine Father’s voice spoke in his ear,

“This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased. Listen to him!”

And all of the sudden, the arms let go and Peter collapsed onto the ground,

his eyes closed so as not to let the image escape,

and those words embedded forever on his memory.

A hand touched his shoulder and he looked up and there was Jesus, smiling.

And he knew – this time he KNEW – who this Jesus was – not only the Savior of Israel,

but the one who had saved, and was saving, and would always be there to save him,

the one Jesus loved – him, Simon, Peter.

There are different kinds of knowing.

In the 3 years he had been following Jesus, Peter had gotten to know a ton of things about him. He

had accumulated that knowledge through his 5 senses,

especially the things he had seen with his eyes and heard with his ears.

But then when Jesus asked that question about who the disciples thought he was,

a deeper kind of knowing occurred in Peter –

a knowledge that incorporated all that he already knew about Jesus,

but came from within – not from without.

It was as if God had been leaving puzzle pieces around

and Peter had been picking them up with his senses and collecting them in his brain,

maybe even managing to put a few together here and there,

and then suddenly when Jesus asked that question,

it felt as if all of the pieces magically swirled around and fell into position

and he could see the whole picture – complete and clear and it made perfect sense:

Jesus was the Christ, the Messiah.

But then had come the pieces that didn’t fit, that there wasn’t a place for, and he had rejected them.

And Jesus had rebuked him. And then it was as if nothing made sense again.

Until that moment on the mountain when an even deeper knowing occurred in Peter –

not just the pieces of knowledge from without, the things that he had picked up with his senses –

and not just the putting together of those pieces from within,

the insight that suddenly made sense of the pieces,

but now there was a 3rd level of deeper knowing –

one that involved picking up more pieces that could be seen and heard

(Jesus glowing, Moses and Elijah there, God speaking)

and yet were obviously outside the physical realm.

This was a knowing that came with experiencing the presence of the living God.

That's what Peter is trying to convey in today's second reading.

It's not enough to know about Jesus,
to have all those pieces of the puzzle rattling around in our minds.

You can come to church every day of your life, you can read the Bible from cover to cover,
you can give your time and money to help those in need,
and spend your life serving on church committees, and all of those things are just pieces.

And pieces aren't enough.

It takes the Spirit to put those pieces together in a way that leads us to the inner conviction
that Jesus is who he says he is – our Lord & Savior, our Good Shepherd & Gate for us sheep,
Living Water and Bread of Life, the Light of the World and the Living Vine,
the Way and the Truth, the Resurrection and the Life.

And even that inner conviction may not be enough to get us through the rough times,
the times when the new pieces no longer fit into the old structures we've believed complete,
the times when doubt and depression and despair overtake us,
the times when we falter and fall and fail.

Sometimes we need a mountaintop experience,
an experience in which Jesus shines a light in our darkness,
an experience when we hear God speaking to us.

Like Peter, I spent my whole life getting to know things about Jesus.

And at the point when I was about ready to throw all the pieces of the puzzle into the garbage bin,
they all came together in a moment when I saw the risen Christ.

That deeper knowledge kept me in the faith for decades.

But at some point, I was picking up more new pieces that no longer seemed to fit
and once again I was full of doubt and depression and despair
because it seemed like I had gotten it wrong after all.

When a pastor friend assured me that I hadn't, I said then I need a sign, a miracle.

She assured me if I needed one, God would give me one. And God did.

And that experience, like the Transfiguration experience for Peter, is 1 that I can never ever forget
because I now know on a level deeper than facts, and on a level even deeper than insight;
I know on the level of an experience that extends beyond the laws of this physical world
into the spiritual, the mystical, the miraculous.

God has actually overwhelmed me with signs and wonders and miracles,

and I have no doubt that God will continue to supply one anytime God sees I am in need.

The Spirit's job is to work in each & everyone of you to draw you deeper into relationship with God

– to move you from facts to insight and from insight to experience,
and from one experience into ever deepening experiences.

How do you move from one to the other?

God tells us in our gospel: Jesus is God's beloved Child. Listen to him.

Will you pray with me?

God, You know the state of every mind and heart and body and spirit in this place.

You know where each of us is along our journey.

Work in our minds to put together the pieces we've learned,
so that we might not only know about you but actually know you.

When we need to experience you, take us up the mountain & reveal yourself to us in all your glory.

And then open our ears that we might truly listen. Thank you for all you are and all you do.

We pray in the name of Jesus and by the power of the Spirit. Amen