

THE DIFFICULTY OF DOING NOTHING

“Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and John,
and led them up a high mountain apart,
by themselves.

“And he was transfigured before them,
and his clothes became dazzling white,
such as no one on earth could bleach them.
And there appeared to them Elijah with Moses,
who were talking with Jesus.

“Then Peter said to Jesus,
‘Rabbi, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings,
one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.’

“He did not know what to say . . . for they were terrified.

“Then a cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud there came a voice,
‘This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!’

“Suddenly when they looked around,
they saw no one with them anymore, but only Jesus.

“As they were coming down the mountain,
he ordered them to tell no one about what they had seen,
until after the Son of Man had risen from the dead.” **Mark 9:2-9**

I’m not sure how to describe grief. I think it must be one of those things you know when you see, or you know it when you feel it. Maybe it’s most evident in the eyes: the exhaustion that shines through when you’ve cried yourself out – cried until there were no more tears. Or maybe it’s in the posture: the visible energy it takes just to stand straight. I’m not sure how to describe it, but I wonder if you’ve seen it, maybe even felt it.

It was visible in Caitlin when we first met. She was silent next to her mother, impeccably dressed in all black. She sat through worship without saying a word; she stood when it was time to stand, kneeled when it was time to kneel, went up for communion when it was time, but never said a word: not a prayer, not a hymn, not a word.

I met Caitlin on a trip to Jamaica this past January with 15 other Columbia students and professors. She goes to law school at the University of Chicago, but she was home, in Jamaica, to attend the funeral of her best friend. He was my age. He was shot on his way to pick up his girlfriend for a date.

We learned a lot about the violence in Jamaica our first few days there. We heard the statistics, learned about the drug trade, which they think is to blame, and analyzed together the impact of such violence on a country.

But Caitlin's grief shattered all I had heard. She slept most of the day while I was visiting with her family. Her mom told me what had happened, that Caitlin had been up all night crying, that the funeral was Tuesday. Caitlin never said a word about her friend, though she was very gracious.

We talked about school and relationships, we realized our birthdays were only a day apart, but it was clear that her grief was all consuming, and I found that I didn't have any words with which to greet it. No words of comfort that didn't sound hollow and nothing I could do that would change the situation. I'm not sure I've ever felt quite so inept.

The next week we visited one of the men's prisons in Jamaica. I thought after hearing so much about the violence and having seen the grief it causes first hand, that I'd be glad to see a prison, glad to see there were consequences for causing such pain. But I don't suppose one is ever glad to see a prison.

The prisons in Jamaica are overcrowded, to put it mildly. The one we visited was mostly an open air prison – cells opened onto balconies and prisoners were allowed to roam freely in their own clothes because there aren't enough uniforms nor room in the cells for all the men.

While our group was touring the prison, one of the guards pointed out to me a section of cells reserved for boys under the age of 18, most of them in for drug trafficking or use. You could tell immediately. They had clothes strewn everywhere, music was playing from somewhere, and a soccer ball was being volleyed back and forth. I looked at those boys, and I saw my brother.

My brother who wore those clothes when he was seventeen, who listened to that music, and played soccer. My brother, who if we had been born in Jamaica, could very easily have been one of those boys behind bars. I looked at those boys on that balcony and realized how long they would be in prison, and how old they would be when they would be when they got a second chance and I wished more than anything that I could do something. Anything.

Our trip to Jamaica was a strange one. We heard so much about the poverty and violence. We had lectures on the gangs, the political violence, on the drug problem and the school system. We learned about health care in the country and family systems.

And we saw what we learned about – the poverty in their schools, the prisons, the informal living communities composed of tin sheds built on top of each other, a web of wires running overhead to steal power from the nearest pole, the rural poverty of the hills, the injustice of the tourism industry. We saw, and we heard, and we learned, and we did nothing. We were spectators. Tourists. We did nothing to alleviate the poverty we saw. And there was nothing we could do

about the injustice of international politics. Nothing we could do about the violence. All we could do was listen, and look, and learn.

Peter is in a similar situation on the mountain.

Peter has been with Jesus from the beginning of his ministry.

He was there when Jesus healed a man on the Sabbath and angered the Pharisees. He was there when Jesus healed a leper,

a paralytic,
and the man with the withered hand.

He was there when Jesus taught the multitude at the seaside,
told parables,
and stilled a storm.

He was there when Jesus cast out demons,
raised a little girl from the dead,
and stopped a woman's hemorrhages.

He was there when Jesus fed the five thousand,
when Jesus walked on water,
when Jesus healed a blind man.

He's been there from the beginning. He's seen it all.

And when Jesus sent out the disciples to heal and cast out demons?

Peter went. And healed. And cast out demons.

He's been doing it all.

And so when we reach the mountain of the transfiguration, with Peter, and James, and John, and Jesus, it's like we've slammed into a wall, or a mountain if you will. Everything slows down. Jesus, for the first time since his ministry began, says nothing, does nothing. No one is healed, no demons are cast out, no parables are told, no people are fed. This event is devoted to illumination, and watching, and it is full of description. They are alone, apart, up high, on a mountain. Jesus is changed. His clothes turn white, dazzling white, whiter than you or I could make them. There are visions of prophets: Elijah, specifically, with Moses. There is a cloud. And a voice from on high. And a command. Listen. And then it is all gone. And they are alone, apart, up high, on a mountain.

And in the middle of it all, there's Peter: fumbling for words, wanting to do something. Anything.

I know the feeling.

I didn't witness the transfiguration event that Peter did. The only dazzling white in Jamaica was the sand. And I saw no prophets of old, and heard no voices from a cloud. But in the face of all the poverty and violence I saw in Jamaica, *I cannot tell you* how much I felt like Peter on that mountain. I wanted so badly to do something. Anything. Construct dwellings, feed people, tend the sick. Anything. But we were not in Jamaica to *do* anything. Nor was Peter on the mountain to *do* anything. We were there to learn and to bear witness, just as Peter was.

And Peter is not the only one on the mountain forced into the role of observer. Jesus also is unusually passive. The text says Elijah and Moses were talking with him, but there is no record of anything Jesus said. He moves from being the subject of all the action to being the object: from the healing and teaching, to the one being talked to and pronounced about. For the first time in Mark's gospel, Jesus is silent and still: bearing witness to his own transfiguration and the events on the mountain.

We often tend to think of passivity as a bad thing. Of silence and stillness as the lack of words and actions. And often they feel that way. After such an overwhelming experience, it's often difficult to find adequate words to describe what we have witnessed. And so we find ourselves silent. And it's a frustrating silence, it is *definitely* a lack of words. And in the face of all the bad news in the world, all the injustice, it is too easy to find ourselves overwhelmed and unsure of what to do. And our stillness, it does feel like a lack of something – a lack of a productive way to make a difference, to make life better, to work for the kingdom.

But this text, it shows there's another way to look at silence and stillness. Another way to understand our lack of words and frustration over our inability to fix things. This text shows there is value in bearing witness. It does not privilege doing nothing over doing something – it certainly does not privilege silence over proclamation – it acknowledges there are times when there is nothing to do and nothing that can be said.

Diana Eck writes about such a time in her book, *Encountering God*. She says, “when we keep watch we do not busy ourselves changing the course of events. We are not able to use our cleverness, our strength, our connections, to alter the circumstances, for moments of fear and grief are often unalterable. How many are the times we fail one another, not by intentional or malicious actions, but simply by our ineptitude at watching with, at being with, at being vigilant.”¹

There will be time to speak, time to act. There does come a time when we are called to proclaim what we have seen.

In the meantime, there is value in bearing witness. Value in paying attention and watching what is happening around us. There is value in being silent and still so we might notice where God is at work in the world and where creation is crying out from pain and injustice. It is comforting, life giving, in times of grief and pain, in situations of injustice to know that someone else sees, someone else has noticed, someone else cares. When we bear witness, God is with us; God sees what we see, and is present where we are present.

The challenge then is to put ourselves in places where we can see God's work in the world as well as God's suffering. The challenge is to take the time to see, to listen: to go on trips of presence such as the one Bob Leslie is on in Colombia, to sit with those who are grieving, to watch the news, to see the people on the street. The challenge is to keep watching even when it is

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overwhelming, even when it is frightening or beyond comprehension, even when there are not words. The call is to bear witness, and to trust that God is in the watching.

Thanks be to God.