

Luke 9:28-36

²⁸ About eight days after Jesus said this, he took Peter, John and James with him and went up onto a mountain to pray. ²⁹ As he was praying, the appearance of his face changed, and his clothes became as bright as a flash of lightning. ³⁰ Two men, Moses and Elijah, ³¹ appeared in glorious splendour, talking with Jesus. They spoke about his departure, which he was about to bring to fulfilment at Jerusalem. ³² Peter and his companions were very sleepy, but when they became fully awake, they saw his glory and the two men standing with him. ³³ As the men were leaving Jesus, Peter said to him, Master, it is good for us to be here. Let us put up three shelters—one for you, one for Moses and one for Elijah. (He did not know what he was saying.) ³⁴ While he was speaking, a cloud appeared and enveloped them, and they were afraid as they entered the cloud. ³⁵ A voice came from the cloud, saying, This is my Son, whom I have chosen; listen to him. ³⁶ When the voice had spoken, they found that Jesus was alone. The disciples kept this to themselves, and told no-one at that time what they had seen.

Visions of Glory

Dan McCoig | 14 February 2010

Whether the topic is the JFK assassination or The Da Vinci Code, we are fascinated by talk of secret plots that change the course of history.

But perhaps we are missing the greatest “conspiracy” of all time.

Americans love conspiracy theories.

Think of rumors about a CIA conspiracy to kill President Kennedy. Concerns about fluoride in our drinking water.

Claims of Jewish involvement in 9/11.

The popularity of the television show *The X-Files* and Dan Brown’s book *The Da Vinci Code*.

All revolve around the belief that powerful people or organizations are secretly manipulating historical events.

Most of this is crazy-talk, but still we find ourselves drawn to it.

There is something within us that tries to make sense of tragic or shocking events, and very often we try to pin blame on a mysterious group of people conspiring to do us harm.

We’re Americans, so we think of ourselves as common men and women — you know, “We the people of the United States” — distrustful and even disdainful of powerful elites.

When something goes wrong, we look for a conspiracy theory to reveal the secrets of the powerful to everyday folks.

Shankar Vedantam of *The Washington Post* (June 5, 2006), makes the point that nothing ever happens by accident in the world of conspiracy theories.

Instead, “the hidden hand of the puppeteer is everywhere.”

Of course, it’s one thing to see a hidden hand in the assassination of JFK.

It’s another thing to see a hidden hand in the story of the transfiguration.

In today’s passage from Luke, we catch sight of something really strange happening, a paranormal something that is way off the charts.

If you’re Peter, James and John, you can’t make up this stuff.

More weird than catching a boatload of fish on the left side than the right side of the boat.

God is orchestrating a shocking event — one that terrifies but also glorifies.

It’s a divine conspiracy, you could say.

Collusion.

Collaboration.

The story begins with Jesus taking Peter, James and John up a mountain to pray. Suddenly, God changes the appearance of Jesus' face, and makes his clothes dazzling white.

Moses and Elijah appear in glory, and they speak of Jesus' departure — which he is about to accomplish in Jerusalem.

Then a cloud comes and overshadows them all, and the disciples are terrified.

The voice of God thunders, "This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!"

And as quickly as the stunning spectacle starts, it ends.

Jesus is found alone, and the disciples remain stuck in bewildered silence (Luke 9:28-36).

We can call this a conspiracy because it involves a powerful force no less than the Lord God Almighty, maker of heaven and earth.

God intervenes in human affairs and manipulates a historical event, turning a mountaintop prayer retreat into an awe-inspiring announcement that Jesus is God's Chosen One, his Messiah, his Beloved Son.

Look at the story, and you can see that the hidden hand of God is everywhere.

But there's a problem.

The word "conspiracy" carries a ton of heavy, negative baggage these days.

(Last summer, the Brits uncovered a plot to blow up as many as 10 airliners mid-air as they were about to land over heavily populated areas in the United States).

Yet, the word is really the right word in this case.

The word "conspire" literally means "breathing together."

When powerful people plan together secretly, they are "breathing together" — you can just picture them huddling together and plotting away in some undisclosed location.

In the same way, when God works with us to advance his will, we "breathe together" with God.

God's *ruah* — the Hebrew word meaning breath, spirit or wind — fills us with life, inspiration and power, and it gives us the ability to push God's plan into the world.

God does not do God's work alone.

Think of Jesus on the mountaintop, breathing together with God.

Moses and Elijah, breathing together with God.

Peter, John and James — confused by what they are seeing, but beginning to breathe together with God, but it's more like a gasping than smooth, easy breathing.

Whenever people breathe together with God, they become part of a divine "conspiracy."

So what does it mean for us to be breathing with God today?

We are invited into the Lord's conspiracy, and challenged to be part of a network of cells operating all over the world.

Within these cells, we breathe with one another, but more importantly we breathe with God.

We allow God's breath — God's *ruah* — to fill us with life, to inspire us, and to give us the power to push his divine agenda.

To get a grasp of the specifics of God's plan, we have to go back to that original meeting on the mountaintop.

There, the conspiracy is hatched, and the plan begins to unfold.

Prayer. At the beginning, Jesus is praying.

There is no better way to begin the process of breathing with God than to follow Jesus in this practice.

Prayer settles us down and opens us up — it allows us to shed our ambitions and to immerse ourselves in the desires of the Lord.

Prayer doesn't so much change God's mind as it changes our hearts — it makes us much more likely to be co-conspirators with the Lord.

Prayer is not about asking for things and then getting what we want — instead, it is about asking for God's presence and then getting what we need.

Even if God does not bring you the answer you want, writes Frederick Buechner, God "will bring you himself.

And maybe at the secret heart of all our prayers that is what we are really praying for."

Appearance. Suddenly, Christ's appearance changes.

His face is transformed, and his clothes become dazzling white.

As a sign of his intimacy with God, the face of Jesus becomes radiant — Matthew says it "shone like the sun" (Matthew 17:2).

Jesus shines like Moses coming down off Mount Sinai, with a face so bright that the people are afraid to come near him (Exodus 34:29-30).

Once you start breathing with God, your appearance is going to change.

This was true for Moses.

It was true for Jesus.

And it's true for you.

When you are in a divine conspiracy, you look, sound, and act like a different person.

You offer your enemies a smile.

You speak the truth to your neighbors.

You live in love, as Christ loved you.

You act in ways that are kind and tenderhearted, forgiving others as Christ has forgiven you (Ephesians 4:25-32).

You begin to live a transfigured life, a life that is transformed by true intimacy with God.

Discipline and self-denial. Next, Moses and Elijah appear, and talk about God's plan for Jesus — in particular, they speak of Christ's departure, "which he was about to accomplish in Jerusalem" (vv. 30-31).

This is a difficult topic, since it involves Jesus' suffering, death and resurrection, but it is an essential one, since it contains the most important events in God's divine conspiracy. Jesus was resolute; he set his face toward the cross.

Through his death on the cross, Jesus brings us forgiveness of our sins, and through his resurrection on Easter morning gives us the gift of new life.

Moses, Elijah and Jesus are "conspiring" together — breathing together — about this world-changing plan, and although Peter wants to build three dwellings to capture the glory of the moment (v. 33), Jesus knows that the divine conspiracy cannot be arrested on the mountaintop. It has to move relentlessly toward the cross.

Jesus also made the point that if we're going to follow him, to "breathe" with him as it were, it's going to mean self-denial; it's going to mean the death of selfish desire and the birth of godly desire.

Followship. If you're a witness to what Peter, et al., were witness to, you can't be the same.

You've got to follow and get on board, or forever give it up.

Think about it.

As Peter is speaking, God's voice thunders out of the cloud, clarifying the identity of Jesus.

"This is my Son," says the Lord God Almighty, "my Chosen; listen to him!" (v. 35).

God is making the stiletto-sharp point that Jesus is his unique son and his chosen servant, the one through whom God is working out his conspiracy of salvation.

Jesus is the way, the truth and the life — the Savior who has come to reconcile the world to God.

Too often today, we downplay the uniqueness of Jesus, seeing him as just one of many wise and compassionate spiritual leaders who have had a positive impact on the world.

We fall into the trap of "truthiness" — a term coined by comedian Stephen Colbert.

Truthiness refers to something known intuitively, instinctively or “from the gut,” without regard to evidence, logic or intellectual examination.

Truthiness is found in a sweet and sentimental understanding of Jesus, one that perceives him as kind, gentle, meek and mild.

This grasp is intuitive and instinctive, and it has some merit to it — but it ignores a piece of crucial evidence.

Look at the transfiguration.

Examine it.

Breathe it in, deeply.

This event reveals that Jesus is an exalted Lord, Chosen One of God, a messianic King with power to change the course of history.

King of kings and Lord of lords — that’s the truth about Jesus, not the truthiness.

Once you’ve seen this side of Jesus, you’ve got to pick up your cross and follow, or get out of the way.

He is a man on a mission, and he’s not going to hang back and sing “Kumbayah” with a bunch of stragglers.

When the voice of God stops speaking, Jesus is suddenly left alone with his disciples.

Luke tells us that “they kept silent and in those days told no one any of the things they had seen” (v. 36).

No surprise there.

The disciples had been stunned by this experience, hit hard by an unfiltered blast of the power of their divine Master.

It took them some time to recover from the shock of being drawn into a divine conspiracy.

For you, however, the end of the story is different.

You know what it means to breathe with God.

You’ve had time to get used to the fact that Jesus is Lord.

You are beginning to understand the significance of his suffering, death and resurrection.

You know that God’s conspiracy has begun, and that it continues to impact human lives and change the course of history.

Take a deep breath now, for only one question remains for you to answer: “Are you breathing with God?”

Amen.