

“Uncovering What Is Hidden”
February 19, 2023
Scripture: Exodus 24:12-18; Matthew 17:1-9

I love stories that uncover realities that are hidden from the world and often from the story's own protagonist. That's why I've always been drawn to comics and superhero movies. I love the idea that there are people walking around who possess great powers but nobody around them knows. One element of that is the idea of a secret or hidden identity, especially when that identity's been forgotten somehow.

One of my favorite movies is one called “Hook.” It's a re-telling of the story Peter Pan. In the movie Robin Williams plays a successful, driven businessman in charge of his company's merger and acquisition department, named Peter Banning. We discover early on that Peter was an orphan who was taken in by a kindly woman named Wendy when he was only 12. Peter and his family are traveling to London to visit Wendy, who is very old now, when she's being honored for her work among boys who have been orphaned. Wendy, of course, knows Peter's true identity as Peter Pan, but he's long since forgotten that. In fact, when Wendy first sees Peter and asks about his work, Peter's son jumps in to say his dad takes over smaller companies and if anything gets in his way, he “blows them out of the water!” Wendy turns to Peter and says, “Why, Peter, you've become a pirate!”

Over the course of the movie Peter is helped to rediscover his true identity through the work of the Lost Boys and even Captain Hook himself. It sounds silly, but it really is a powerful tale of how easily we can lose our true selves and the work we need to do to uncover what's been hidden.

So much of our spiritual life is spent plumbing the depths of our souls to uncover what's hidden within us. We are very adept at hiding. We present the world only what we want the world to see and sometimes that's shaped by many forces around us that are invested in conformity. If we just keep our mouths shut and go along with the flow we'll stay out of trouble and won't rock the boat. Discovering there could be something more to the world, to ourselves, than we've always been taught is dangerous and can lead to chaos. It's better to stay in control.

I think this moment of transfiguration when Jesus is revealed as a sort of cosmic figure and not simply the teacher his followers imagined he was, is meant to convey a reality that lies within all of us. What Peter, James and John see in him in that moment is the glory that lies at the heart of all creation, the glory hidden in each of us waiting to be uncovered. As Father Richard Rohr puts it in his book *The Universal Christ*, “Divinity and humanity must somehow be able to speak as one, for if the union of God and humankind is ‘true’ in Jesus, there is hope that it might be true in all of us, too.”

Yet we spend so much of our time and effort obscuring that union. We create all sorts of political, economic, religious systems meant to keep us in the dark. Our systems are built on the assumption that humans are fatally flawed. Our doctrines of “original sin” and “total depravity” are expressed through our policies. Why else would we insist on protecting our access to guns

even as gun violence continues to rise? Or create a system of healthcare dependent on people's ability to pay rather than providing greater access to those with greater need? What we're saying is at heart people don't really deserve security or well-being. If we want protection, we need to arm ourselves to the teeth. If we want access to healthcare, we need to earn it.

We pass those views off as freedom when in fact they're a reflection of our captivity to the belief that at heart we're evil and there's nothing truly good in us. And we've convinced ourselves that's what the Bible teaches us. But nothing could be further from the truth. What the story of the Israelites reveals, for instance, is God's desire to instill in them an awareness of their true nature, their capacity for love. That's what Torah is all about. When Moses makes his way into the cloud, he goes to receive instruction that provides the path for the people to discover their truest selves, their inner glory. He's given the means to uncover what's hidden within the heart of the people, the union of Divine and Human that lies at the core of our creation.

When that reality is revealed on the mountain through Jesus, though, Peter, James and John have trouble grasping it. They think they're discovering something about Jesus' status only. Maybe that's why the voice of God intervenes. They still need to listen, to pay attention to what's being revealed not simply about Jesus but about themselves.

That's hard for us to do. It's hard on the one hand to believe there's something of value in us when we spend so much time justifying our bad behavior. And on the other hand it's hard for us to confront the effect our behaviors have had on those around us. The other day I watched, as many of you may have, the victim impact statements made at the sentencing of the person who committed the massacre at Tops on May 14th. They were hard to hear. There was so much pain and sadness shared. But hearing them was important. They weren't just talking about their personal losses, but how those losses uncovered the hidden forces of hate at work in our society. And in handing down the sentence, the judge made it clear that the defendant's actions were not some isolated aberration, but the result of centuries of white supremacy and racial hatred that our society has allowed to infect every facet of our lives. Her words were a powerful indictment of us and what we've allowed ourselves to become.

And the only way to eradicate that hatred is to uncover it, bring it out into the open where it's full ugliness and the pain it causes can be seen. That's why Nikole Hannah-Jones' "1619 Project" is so important for us to read and watch, or Isabel Wilkerson's book *Caste* is so significant. They both uncover hidden history and hidden dynamics that have shaped our country and when we see them can help us find ways to heal.

If there's one thing scripture can teach us, through the experience of the people of Israel out of slavery and into freedom or the teachings and ministry, the life, death and resurrection of Christ, it is that we are not at the mercy of our history. We can choose what we become; we can take hold of our future and live in a new way. But we must be willing to uncover what's been hidden, even when what we find is frightening or shameful. Jesus' transfiguration reveals the possibility that there is more to us than we can see. It reveals the promise that God's glory resides in us, that our true nature isn't born in sin or totally depraved, but we're made good and infused with the presence of God.

Indeed, we can even overcome the damage we've done through injustice and hatred. If we're willing to listen to those who have been wronged and commit ourselves to a future where we live for others and not only ourselves, we can uncover the hidden glory within and be transfigured, made new in the image of God. For Jesus that transition was spontaneous on a mountaintop; for us it takes deep listening and hard work, but we carry within us the capacity to do it, just as he does. There is more to each of us than meets the eye, more of God's presence to be uncovered. Let what's hidden in you be revealed.

Amen