

Feb 21, 2021
Rev. Jane Florence
Title: "Ancestor Wisdom"
Text: Mark 9:2-8



On the Day of the Dead in Mexico, Dia de los Muertos, ancient Aztec festivals continue to this today. During the three-day period, families usually decorate graves of loved ones with altars containing the favorite foods and beverages, as well as photos and memorabilia, of the departed. The intent is to encourage visits by the departed souls. Ancestor veneration is customary in histories of Europe, Asia, African and Oceania cultures. In some African cultures, ancestors are seen as being able to intercede on behalf of the living, often as messengers between humans and God. Ancestor veneration tends to emphasize links between the living and the ancestors. Ancestors are also widely honored, and venerated in India and China. Native Peoples of the Americas believed in ancestor wisdom transmission. As the Iroquois prophet put it, "The distance between our surface world and the world of the spirits is exactly as wide as the edge of the maple leaf." Native people believed that elders can teach us how to heal with the Spirit World and how to find protection, guidance and wisdom. We can call on to the Spirit World for the healing of our minds, body and spirit. Shamanic journeying - crossing the veil from this world to the spirit world - was common practice.

In the Celtic tradition, they are called Thin Places, thresholds, "potent doorways within our sacred world, where the ordinary and the non-ordinary come to rest in each other's arms. ...crossroads where the world of the spirits and the world of the embodied mingle. . where living descendants and ancestors commune. where the unseen and the seen share ground." (Frank McGowen) It's called "walking between the worlds" in the Scottish tradition. Rumi the 13th century Persian poet names- luminous places are "where two worlds touch."

Early Christianity taught of these thin places, where the membrane between ordinary world and the non-ordinary world is so thin that it is permeable. Moments or places where the Divine fabric of all being pokes through the surface and we catch a glimpse. Some thin places can be found on a map; some just within.

For many if not most, Western Christianity moved away from all these notions of spirits, and ancestors visitations. The Age of Reason, Age of Enlightenment, Age of Self-Egos too smart for such things that go bump in the night or surprise in the day. We became too smart, then too skeptical then too fearful. We called it voodoo, magic of the forest. The Puritans said it was of the Devil, and shamans medicine wheels became too primitive and were replaced by modern Medicine machinery. Those who claimed they could commune with the dead- seances, or psychic readings either dismissed as frauds or demonized as Satanic witches. Western Christianity either sent our dead to an eternal lake of fire - or the pearly gates of heaven, either way they were one way trips and the souls of heaven were just as imprisoned as the souls of hell - for once there, always there.

What do we intellectual, sophisticated Western Christians do with a story that is told of Jesus - in all three synoptic gospels and writings of Peter, that relays early Christian beliefs in ideas that most dismiss or scoff or barricade? Listen with me to these words from the gospel of Mark

Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and John, and led them up a high mountain apart, by themselves. (Jesus image) And he [jesus] 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 [peter] 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 any more, but only Jesus.

May we hear what the Spirit is saying to us.

Do with this story as you wish, just don't ignore it. Our Christian story tells of ancestor wisdom - a pow wow of ancestors if you will. Jesus is preparing for his journey to death. He knows that he will be killed at the hands of the men - priests and empire - who are threatened by his message. He knows his death is coming and, his disciples - well, they are good guys, but they aren't the ones he can turn to for guidance. They aren't ones he can wrestle with the questions before him. Jesus needs support. He needs wisdom; he needs guidance, so, as Jed pointed out last week, Jesus got up early in the mornings and spent time in meditation, in prayer, time in union with God. On this day, he wants even more union with the Divine. The stories say he went up on a high mountain. (like Moses went up on Mt Saini - like Elijah fled to Mount Horeb) The stories say there on that mountain top, flooded with dazzling white light and mist Jesus communes with Moses and Elijah.

For those of you not clear.. let me remind you that Moses lived about 2,000 years before Jesus, and Elijah lived 800 years earlier. Moses represents the law of God; Elijah represents the prophet of God. Matthew, Mark, Luke say that Jesus spent time in holy union with God through daily prayer, and he spent time in the presence of his faith ancestors from millennia before him. We can only imagine the content of their conversation because Peter interrupted it. Peter suddenly he gets a building plan, "this is awesome. Let's build three dwellings, one for each of you... on he goes" Do you think deceased spirits needed a dwelling? After Peter blurted out his brilliant offer, the text says, "He did not know what to say, for they were terrified." Isn't that just like us. When we don't know what to say, we just blurt out first thing that comes to mind. When we are terrified, we step into the drama and start screaming ideas.

I love that next line, "then a cloud overshadowed them." A cloud, fog, mist. Imagine Peter rambling on, and a soft, mist envelops him, like a gentle hand across his mouth. It surrounds him like a blanket of fog, and a voice is heard,

Oh Peter, stop talking and listen

Be Quiet, this isn't about your plan, You aren't here to pitch your ideas or a tent.

This isn't about you, Peter... Just Listen, Listen...

"This is my Beloved. Listen to him"

This story give us a glimpse that ancestor wisdom that Western Christianity set aside as superstitious, fake, nonsense. Our faith tradition teaches that ancestor wisdom is available to those who are willing to develop listening skills. This story that reminds us that sometimes even those close to Jesus still don't get it. Maybe we should let go of all our profound

thinking and religious dogmas and just experience what is. This story teaches us there are thin places in this world. Thin places geographically found on maps, and thin places within the geography of our hearts. This story teaches that there are high points along our journey, mountain top experiences where the veil between this world and the other is permeated.

The story continues. They don't build dwellings in the clouds. They walk back down the mountain. Peter doesn't get to stay on top with his three gurus. Jesus doesn't get to stay on the top where he is safe from what lies ahead.

Our stories are made of those high points along our journey where we experience the indescribable and where we have moments beyond logic or comprehension. Our stories are made of those journeys back through the valleys into ordinary time where there is work yet to do.

We can open our minds to the possibilities of more than. We can open our hearts to the wisdom of our ancestors. We can be still and listen.
May it be so.