

“When Our Eyes See the King”

Introduction: In this season of epiphany, our two texts for this morning give us two men, Isaiah and Peter, who both experience an epiphany, a manifestation or revelation of God. Well, let’s be a little more real: Both of these guys experienced an eye-popping, jaw-dropping encounter with the mind-numbing, threatening, yet glorious holiness of the living, Almighty, God of the universe! This encounter drops both men to their knees, and moves them not to want more of God, but to wish that this holy and almighty being go away, far, far away. And yet, God doesn’t. In fact, he comes closer.

I don’t want to presume, but I think it’s safe to say that this kind of encounter is one we don’t often have. What I’ve found myself asking this week as I’ve reflected on these texts is this: Why not? Why don’t I drop to my knees more often? What prevents me? What would actually bring me to my knees? And if I got there, what would God do with me? Let’s go to the lake with the crowd and see if we can find some answers.

I. Jesus in the Boat

A. The lake is called Gennesaret, another name for the Sea of Galilee. It’s a body of fresh water in the north of Palestine that runs thirteen miles long and five miles wide. While, as we saw last week, Jesus spent regular time teaching in the synagogues in the region in the early days of his ministry, his ministry also breaks out into other, everyday venues. Jesus doesn’t wait for the people to come to him; in a very missional way, he goes to where they are. Since many enjoyed going to the lake, that’s where Jesus went. On this particular day, the crowds at the lake had grown so large that, in a neat bit of resourcefulness, Jesus hops into a boat that was sitting on the beach and asks its skipper to put out a few yards and then drop anchor so that he could better speak to the crowds from there. The shoreline in this area contains a number of steep inlets that would function as a kind of amphitheater, making it easy for those in the crowd to hear what Jesus had to say and to view what was going on.

B. Interestingly, Luke doesn’t record a thing about what Jesus taught, just that it was the “word of God” (v. 1). It seems as if what happened after Jesus taught, what Jesus went on to do, would be the major lesson for the day. Turns out what Jesus wanted to do was go fishing. Even more, he wanted to tell the fishermen *how* and *where* to fish. Now, just think about that for a moment. These guys were seasoned fishermen. They knew the lake and they knew the best times to fish. They had just been out all night and had caught nothing. After cleaning their nets, I imagine they were looking forward to having a good breakfast followed by a nap. But here was this guy, Jesus, urging them to go back out. To be sure he spoke well, but he was a carpenter, not a fisherman. “Jesus, you don’t know what you’re talking about here,” Simon Peter must have thought. It would be like me telling the guys who are coming to work on the steeple how to do their job! They would be foolish to listen to me.

C. Sometimes, however, don’t we approach Jesus in that way? “Jesus,” we might say, “I hear what you’re saying about how to handle my job, or my finances, or my marriage, or my sexuality, or my enemies, but I really know best so I wish you’d just keep quiet!” Peter could’ve said that, and we wouldn’t blame him a bit. But he didn’t. Somewhere in his heart another voice was present, a voice which reminded him that just a few days ago, this Jesus had been at Peter’s house and had healed his mother-in-law of a high fever. Moreover, he did so just by speaking a word (4:38-39). Maybe his word

was worth listening to. Maybe Jesus did have something to say. So, “because you say so,” Peter let down his nets. When he did so the full force of the power of God opened up. The catch was so amazing that a second boat had to be brought over to help haul it all in.

Illustration: There is a wonderful depiction of this scene in a painting that hangs on the wall of the Eastern Point retreat house in Gloucester. The fish are flying all over the place, the fishermen are frantically trying to gather them all in, the spray from the surf is shooting high in the air, and both boats are wallowing in the water from the weight of the fish. In the midst of the chaos, in the stern of one of the boats, sits Jesus. He has one arm resting on his lap and the other propped up on the rail, and he is just calmly surveying, and even enjoying the scene. As you gaze at the painting, you can almost hear Jesus saying, “I told you so!” But he is also probably thinking something like, “Peter, just like I changed water into wine at that wedding in Cana, giving you a picture of the abundance and the glory of the kingdom of God, this, too, is a picture of the glory of the kingdom into which I am going to invite you to participate.”

II. Peter on His Knees

A. What Peter saw first of all, however, was the awesome, mind-numbing glory of God in the face of Jesus. Like Isaiah before him, Peter knew that he had come face to face with the King. And his first reaction was one of unworthiness: “Go away from me, Lord; I am a sinful man!” It wasn’t one specific misdemeanor that Peter was confessing but a realization of the gaping chasm that exists between who God is and who we are.

Illustration: I remember while in high school and college taking an occasional trumpet lesson with a man named Bill Scarlett. Bill was the assistant principal trumpet of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra as well as a member of our church. He didn’t teach students on a regular basis but if I had something in particular I was working on he was gracious and would carve out some time to spend with me. I would play, and then he would play what I had just played, and it never sounded like we were playing the same piece! He was just so good, and the chasm between us was so great, that it kept me quite humble.

If we truly see glory, we can also then truly see the distortions of glory all around us, including in us. On a theological level, no one has put it more clearly than the 16th c. Reformation theologian, John Calvin, who wrote in the opening chapter of his *Institutes* that true wisdom comes only from knowledge of God and knowledge of self, and that self-knowledge only comes when we’ve spent time contemplating the face of God. “For, such is our innate pride,” Calvin writes, “we always seem to ourselves just, and upright, and wise, and holy, until we are convinced by clear evidence of our injustice, vileness, folly, and impurity. Convinced, however, we are not, if we look to ourselves only, and not to the Lord also—He being the only standard by the application of which this conviction can be produced.” Calvin goes on: “Men [and women] are never duly touched and impressed with a conviction of their insignificance, until they have contrasted themselves with the majesty of God.” As the old hymn has it, “Only Thou art holy; there is none beside Thee, perfect in power, in love, and purity.”

The majesty of God was what Peter was seeing in the face of Jesus Christ, who has come to reveal God’s glory to us. It brought Peter to his knees. That is not a comfortable place to be, but one which is important to visit. We need to have a clear picture of reality in the present, of both the holiness of God, and also of where we’re not living in harmony with that holiness, so that God, through Jesus, can begin to write a new story for us as we go into the future.

B. Perhaps, therefore, one of the reasons we're not falling to our knees more often is that we're not looking closely enough at the majesty and beauty of the life of Jesus, whose face reveals the living, holy God. Another reason we have trouble seeing is because we're missing what the six-winged seraphim were singing to Isaiah: that the whole earth is filled with God's glory (Isa. 6:3). Helpful to note is that the Hebrew word for glory has at its root the concept of heaviness or weightiness. It's as if God's character, his beauty and truth and justice and mercy is so substantial, so "weighty," that it cannot be confined to the realm of heaven. The weight of it breaks through the veil that separates heaven from earth such that the whole earth is filled with God's glory. Glory, therefore, can come in many shapes and sizes, and in many places, from angels flying around in a vision, like Isaiah experienced while worshipping in the temple, to fish flying around in a boat, like Peter experienced while at work on a lake. If we're really looking, and if we can just slow down a bit, we can see glory in the birth of a child or in a mother nursing that child, we can see glory in the view from a mountain-top or the ocean floor, we can see glory in the setting of the sun or in a blanket of fresh snow, we can see it in a sacrificial act or in sweet time with a friend. All of these things can bring us to our knees, if we stop to contemplate all, and who, is behind it.

C. Finally, I think we miss seeing glory through our attempts to manage or domesticate God for our use, trying to keep him at a safe distance and calling upon him only when we need something. One way Peter might have done this is to have said, "Wow, Jesus, this is really cool, all these fish. If you hang around for the rest of the week, I might be able to catch enough to enable me to retire early!" Or, as a Patriot player is quoted to have prayed before last Sunday's game, "God, give me just one more Super Bowl victory, that's all I ask." We bring God out when we need him to do something for us. He becomes a resource for us to use in accomplishing our purposes. Otherwise, we tend to keep him locked up. And when we do that, we miss the glory, the glory of who he is and the glory of who he wants us to become.

III. Peter on His Feet

A. For the good news is that God, by revealing his awesome, mind-numbing holiness to us, does not desire to plow us over with a stiff-arm of judgment, but to gather us to himself with his embrace of grace. God desires that we recognize and name our guilt and then he desires to obliterate it. Once we've been on our knees, he wants to put us back on our feet again with transformed purpose. He won't go away easily; he comes closer! That's what he does with both Isaiah and Peter. He puts them back on their feet with the cleansing touch of his forgiveness and then invites them to participate in his purposes. Both came to realize that following was not an option because if this man isn't worth following, no one is.

B. Someone once said that humility is to "see oneself in truth." The truth is that we all fall short of the glory of God. But the truth also is that God desires to put us back on our feet and use us in glorious ways. So may we better see ourselves by looking at him, and when we fall on our knees may we take his gracious hand that lifts us back up.