

“A (much needed) Glimpse of Glory”

Introduction: Many of you know that my sister and I have been wrestling over the past year with the best way to provide care for our father. Over the course of the last few months, we finally all agreed that a move into assisted living would be best, and just this past week, a space became available and we have a move in date of April 9. But that doesn't mean that it's going to be an easy transition for him. He'll be leaving the town house he shared with my mother for several years, he'll be downsizing from 1800 to 500 square feet, he'll be giving up his car, and all that has been familiar to his routine will be changing, which, at age 90, with increasing dementia, has already been unsettling to him.

To help ease the transition my sister has taken him over to the new apartment in which he'll be living, talked through with him where his familiar furniture will be placed, and has begun to introduce him to the community and the care givers who will become part of his new daily routine. We hope that these glimpses of his future will help to give him a vision, or sense of assurance now that all will be well.

All of us, I think, no matter where we make our home, given the broken and unpredictable world in which we live, need a sense of assurance that all, ultimately, will be well. We need glimpses of the glory of God as we make our way through this life. The rather mysterious event known as the Transfiguration, which is our focus this morning, is meant to provide us with such a glimpse, with such a vision of assurance, with the assurance that Jesus is the unique one who fulfills the Father's plan for the world, and that we will ultimately, one day, share in his glory.

I. Bewildered Disciples in the Valley

A. Let's begin by considering, for a moment, the assurance the disciples of Jesus needed. When we meet them in Luke 9, they find themselves in a pivotal, transitional time where Jesus is bringing to an end his ministry in Galilee and beginning to set his face resolutely, as Luke puts it, toward Jerusalem and all that awaited him there (9:51). Just days prior to embarking on this itinerary, Jesus has an exchange with his disciples about his identity, but when they seem to get it right, Jesus instructs them not to tell anyone. Then Jesus offers up a bewildering prediction of his future, which is comprised of his suffering, murder, and resurrection. He follows this declaration with a call for his followers to deny themselves, take up their crosses daily, and follow him if they want to share in the life that Jesus is offering. Jesus concludes this string of declarations and exhortations with an almost offhanded comment about his eventual return, in glory, and that some might get a glimpse of such in just a matter of days.

B. We're not told what went on in the week that followed all these remarks, but I imagine that it was a quiet time of almost stunned silence in which his disciples may have taken a wide turn as they encountered Jesus. I imagine that the disciples were left with not only with a sense of bewilderment, but also a sense of fear. Going forward, theirs, evidently, would be no ordinary existence. Following where Jesus was going to lead would not be easy. So, after giving them time to ponder, Jesus invited three of them, Peter, John, and James, those with whom Jesus spent the most intentional time, to be with him while he prayed. Evidently, Jesus also needed some time and space apart to receive divine direction and affirmation. A little hike up into the mountains and some retreat time at the summit, it seemed, would be good for everyone.

II. A Dazzling Conversation on the Summit

A. But this would be a hike, and a retreat, like no other. For, while Jesus was praying, events difficult to fathom took place. Jesus was literally transfigured, lit up in some way, into something brilliant and glorious. His face changed, and his clothing began to shine like a flashes of lightening that just wouldn't quit. He was then joined by Moses and Elijah, both of whom were also in some way gloriously shining. All three are reminiscent of the dazzling nature of the two angels at Jesus' tomb following his resurrection; they also "gleamed like lightening" (Lk. 24:4). As well, echoes of Moses coming down from Mt. Sinai with his face shining after having met with God (Ex. 34:29), and a description of Jesus as "the radiance of God's glory" by the writer of Hebrews (1:3), are present here as well.

B. What was happening? Sometimes you may hear people speak of what are called "thin places." As an old Celtic saying has it, "Heaven and earth are only three feet apart, but in thin places that distance is even shorter." A thin place is one in which an encounter with the divine seems that much more possible. It is a place where the border between God's dimension of reality and our dimension seems particularly "thin." This mountain peak became such a place. Somehow, heaven had broken through. Moses and Elijah, figures of old, were displaying the eternal glory that they now possessed, and Jesus was displaying the eternal glory he would possess, after his death, resurrection, and ascension.

C. Perhaps even more amazing was that in this bedazzled, glorified state, Jesus, Moses, and Elijah began to have a conversation! "Yo, Mo, how's it goin'?" "Eli, you haven't aged a day!" After opening pleasantries, the topic was Jesus' departure (v. 31) which, likely, he had been just praying about. Helpful to know is that the word "departure" is the translation of the word "exodus." It's a word which looks back, of course, to the rescue and leading by God, through Moses, of his people Israel from slavery in Egypt and into the Promised Land. But now used here, it also points forward to the death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus (cf. 9:51) through which he would accomplish a new, or second exodus, rescuing and leading the world's people out of their slavery to sin and death and into his promised new creation. Moses and Elijah, representing the OT law and the prophets, seem to be there in conversation with Jesus to affirm that what God had begun in and through them Jesus was going to bring to fulfillment. It seems to have been a powerful assurance for Jesus as he followed where the law and the prophets were leading, affirming that in turning toward Jerusalem he was on the right track, even though his rescue operation would bring him through much suffering before the glory.

III. A Directing Voice from Heaven

A. This whole scene was also to serve as a powerful assurance for those three disciples, but, worn out it seems from the hike, they were having trouble staying awake! It's hard to imagine how, but, remembering ahead to the Garden of Gethsemane, it wouldn't be the last time these guys would struggle to keep their eyes open while Jesus was praying. Ultimately, the brightness that was shining all around brought them to full attention. Somewhat confused by all that came into focus, Peter blurted out that they should pitch three tents, one each for Jesus and his two friends. Maybe this was to dim the bright light, or to somehow prolong this amazing experience. However, what the Father's voice from heaven made clear is that Jesus was now the only one that mattered. He is unlike anyone else, even two of God's greatest servants. He is the one the Father had chosen to carry out his rescue operation. He is the one the disciples should be listening to. As if to affirm this, when the voice had finished, only Jesus was left, and the whole event ends almost as suddenly as it began.

B. One writer comments that this whole experience is like a parable of what worship can sometimes be. We come to church wanting to be with each other and wanting to learn something helpful from Jesus about how we are to live. And that's ok. But sometimes Jesus seems to take it further. Sometimes it's as if he takes us by the hand and leads us into a realm that shines mysteriously and wondrously, touching our spirits with his Spirit beyond our ability to explain or understand, when we, as our opening psalm put it, behold the power and glory in the sanctuary, and we simply just need to marinate in it for a while. That certainly seemed to be the response of Peter, John, and James. They kept this mountain-top experience to themselves and didn't tell anyone, at that time, what they had seen. How could they? What would they have said? Who would have believed them?

C. But then, tucked away in Peter's infrequently read second letter, he writes this:

For we did not follow cleverly invented stories when we told you about the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ in power, but we were eyewitnesses of his majesty. He received honor and glory from God the Father when the voice came from the Majestic Glory, saying, "This is my Son. . ." We ourselves heard this voice that came from heaven when we were with him on the sacred mountain. [2 Pe. 1:16-18]

In other words, this event on the mountain known as the Transfiguration was used by the Spirit to give those disciples enough of a glimpse of the coming glory of Jesus that they were enabled to persevere in the valleys through which they would have to travel in their life. It was enough to confirm for them, and to want to share and confirm for us so that we may persevere, that Jesus would be returning, in all his glory, to bring to completion what he has begun, to consummate the kingdom that he has inaugurated, and to share his glory with us.

The Book of Common Prayer has a wonderful collect (prayer) that accompanies this transfiguration text, helping us to cry out for its sustaining power:

O God, who before the passion of your only-begotten Son revealed his glory upon the holy mountain: Grant to us that we, beholding by faith the light of his countenance, may be strengthened to bear our cross, and be changed into his likeness from glory to glory.
[Collects: *Last Sunday after the Epiphany*]

Where do you need to behold the light of the countenance of Jesus? How do you need to be strengthened to bear your cross in the valleys through which you are traveling? As we journey to the cross in the Lenten season, may God give us eyes to see that what we see is not all there is. May he give us glimpses of his glory.