

First Presbyterian Church of Kissimmee, Florida
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A Peculiar Glory

Mark 9:2-9 (NRSV)

Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and John, and led them up a high mountain apart, by themselves. And he was transfigured before them, [3] and his clothes became dazzling white, such as no one on earth could bleach them. [4] And there appeared to them Elijah with Moses, who were talking with Jesus. [5] 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." [6] He did not know what to say, for they were terrified. [7] Then a cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud there came a voice, "This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!" [8] Suddenly when they looked around, they saw no one with them any more, but only Jesus.

[9] As they were coming down the mountain, he ordered them to tell no one about what they had seen, until after the Son of Man had risen from the dead.

A GLIMPSE OF GLORY

A lady who is a member of the Greek Orthodox faith attends one of our Bible studies. This past week she was talking about icons, those pictorial representations of the biblical story that play such an important role in their worship. She said, "Icons are like a window into heaven."

I think all of us would like a window into heaven, a way to get just a glimpse of God's glory. We may not use icons in the Presbyterian Church, but we do use music, liturgy, beautiful buildings, the sacraments and preaching in an attempt to do the same thing.

We want just a glimpse of glory. We strain to see and hear what (as the Apostle Paul put it) "eye has not seen and ear has not heard." (1 Corinthians 2:9)

In that regard I'm a bit jealous of Peter, James and John. Why were they the only ones to get a vision? They are often referred to as the inner circle of Jesus' disciples, but I've always wanted to know why. Why did it have to be Peter, James and John? Why not Dale, Betty and Frank for instance?

But, it didn't happen that way. We haven't seen such glory. Just Peter, James and John made the trip up the mountain. And on the mountain they saw the glory of God reflected in Jesus.

The details of this story are reminiscent of past glory and glory to come ... the giving of the law on Mt. Sinai, the overwhelming visions of God's glory given to the prophets of old, and the post resurrection appearances of Jesus. All of these and more are clearly reflected in what the disciples saw.

And just in case they missed the point the glorified Jesus is seen with Moses and Elijah. Elijah who never experienced death was thought to be the herald of the Messiah, and Moses of course was the great lawgiver and liberator who led his people through the wilderness to the Promised Land. The law and the prophets testified to Jesus.

These disciples were the special ones. They were the ones that got the vision we all want.

THE REPOSE TO GLORY

And how did they respond to this overwhelming vision of glory?

They were afraid, and out of fear Peter says, “Lord, it’s great to be here. Let’s build a memorial to this moment. Let’s build tabernacles for You, Moses and Elijah.”

In that regard we haven’t changed much. Whenever the church feels anxious or doesn’t know what to do, we build something really big. Maybe if we can build a bigger cathedral we can capture and institutionalize the glorious moment.

To be honest some of those old cathedrals do a pretty good job of inspiring awe. The expansive domes and the artwork do recall the splendor of God.

But, I believe that even our best attempts to gain a vision of glory do no get us where we want to go. The beautiful music, the profound art and the soaring buildings leave us well short of the heavenly vision.

Sometimes clergy and other worship leaders talk about designing a “powerful worship experience,” an experience that will convict us of God’s power and grant us a glimpse of the holy.

But, as one author pointed out, this is exactly what the Nazis did during World War II. They used worship as a way to whip the people into frenzy and make them think that Hitler’s way was God’s way.

It was a powerful worship experience that gave people the ability to climb the mountain. But, unfortunately it wasn’t God’s mountain.

It was the mountain of despair and shame.

SELF-MADE WORSHIP

Church history is littered with religious leaders who wanted to create their own powerful worship experiences. But, instead of a vision of glory they exploited the people and led the church down hurtful paths.

In fact the whole Bible is filled with similar stories.

Adam and Eve wanted to be like gods and make their own moral judgments. It led to sin and their expulsion from the garden.

Early on the people decided to build the Tower of Babel that would reach all the way to heaven. That led to confusion and division.

Later God's people decided to put their trust in the political power of kings instead of God's grace and guidance. That led to exile and disobedience of God's will.

And the disciples and the people who followed Jesus continued in this tradition. They wanted to bring in the kingdom their way, the way of political power. They wanted nothing to do with God's way, the way of the cross. That led to denial and depression.

All of these people down through history have made the same mistake. They wanted to create glory. They wanted to control it and institutionalize it.

Build three tabernacles on the mountain. That's Peter's anxious solution to the problem of glory. And we have been building our own visions of glory ever since.

But, that doesn't work. The vision can't be captured in this way. The vision is not about us and what we can do. The vision is about God and how God has chosen to reveal Himself to us.

LISTEN TO HIM

We need more than memorial tabernacles and guest appearances by the prophets of old to catch a vision of the glorious. God has chosen to reveal Himself to us in a different way.

The glory of God is revealed in His human Son, Jesus. And if we want to really see glory and hear the truth, we need to listen to him and not to our own anxiety.

In our lesson for today a cloud overshadows the disciples, and they hear that message from above, "This is my Son, the beloved. Listen to him."

That was the problem. They didn't listen to Jesus. They merely wanted his power and glory as a way to project their own dreams and desires.

And this too is still a problem. Often we don't listen to Jesus. We just talk about him.

Jesus for many people is like a chameleon. He blends into our environment and blesses our way of life. We don't listen to him because we think that we already know what he has said.

But, glory is not obtained by us climbing our way up to God. No mountain is high enough for us to see the glory of God. Even the greatest tabernacle cannot reach the

heavens. Glory can only come when God descends to be with us. And God has done just that in Jesus.

THE JESUS NOBODY KNOWS

It continues to amaze me how little we know about Jesus. We still don't listen to him. Jesus has told us again and again (just as he told the disciples again and again) that his way is the way of the cross, that there is suffering on the way to final glory. Indeed, he told us that there is glory in the suffering.

But, we don't want to hear it. We don't want to walk that road during Lent that leads to the cross.

We want to run from those things that are difficult. We don't see climbing the mountain of difficulty as a way to reach glory. We see the mountain of difficulty as a reason to despair.

We are afraid, and we want a quick fix.

Glory never comes cheaply and quickly. Glory is expensive and long suffering. As one commentator put it, "Jesus was rejected, ignored, marginalized, suffered ... died and was buried. And that's what Christians have learned to call glory."

In the gospel of John you see this peculiar definition of glory most clearly. Jesus in anticipation of his death tells his disciples,

"The hour has come for the Son of man to be glorified. Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit ...

Now is my soul troubled. And what should I say ... 'Father, save me from this hour? No, it is for this reason that I have come to this hour. Father, glorify your name.'" (John 12:23-28)

Eugene Peterson commenting on this passage wrote,

"Every gardener knows something of this: each spring we bury seeds in our gardens and in a few weeks enjoy the bloom of flowers and the nourishment of vegetables. The metaphor enables our participation. Jesus, as he so often did, uses a familiar experience that we all have, in this case planting a seed in the soil, to lead us into the unfamiliar, the mystery that he wills us to enter—glory.

Glory is what we are after. Whatever else glory is, it is not just more of what we already have or the perfection of what we have. Do we suppose that Christian life is simply our human, biological, intellectual, moral life developed and raised a few degrees above the common stock?

Do we think that Jesus is ... like a car jack that we use to lever ourselves to a higher plane where we have access to God?

Jesus' imagery, to be followed soon by his sacrifice, is totally counter to our culture of more, more. Could Jesus have made it any clearer?

We don't become more, we become less. Instead of grasping more tightly to whatever we value, we let it all go."

This is the peculiar glory that we see in Jesus. It is glory that comes in the weakness of the flesh. It is glory that comes through suffering as well as joy.

THE GLORIOUS CROSS

After the voice from heaven said, "This is my beloved Son in whom I am well pleased. Listen to him!" the disciples looked up and saw only Jesus the man.

The glory was gone or was it?

The glory was still standing right there in flesh and blood, the Word made flesh.

The disciples would remember and cherish this "glimpse of glory." All three synoptic gospels report this glorious occurrence. It was an important part of the story about Jesus. But, they wouldn't know what it meant until later.

The disciples lived with the glory of heaven all the time. They just didn't know it until after the resurrection and the coming of the Holy Spirit.

That's why Jesus concludes this section by telling his disciples "Don't tell anyone about this until after the resurrection." A glorious vision like this one would be subject to serious misinterpretation without the rest of the story.

The Transfiguration is a shining moment on the way to the cross. Once they go down that mountain conflict and crisis will once again engulf Jesus and his disciples. But, in this one brief shining moment even the cross seemed brighter, as if the cross is something glorious.

Actually, we believe that.

We have cross pins and elaborate gold crosses that we wear around our necks. Some crosses are adorned with jewels. Someone once said it is like wearing highly ornate electric chairs around our necks!

And it's true. The cross was not something pretty and precious. It was a terrible form of execution. And yet in the hands of God, the cross ... that "emblem of suffering and shame" did become glorious. Through the death of Jesus on the cross for our sins the

cross did become golden. It was transformed just as Jesus was transfigured by glory long ago.

DON'T WASTE YOUR PAIN

I continue to read Peter Steinke's book, "Congregational Leadership in Anxious Times." Could there be a better book for a pastor to read in this day and time?

Peter talks about the fact that anxiety in the modern world has reached record levels. And people behave very badly when they are anxious. They act out of emotion, an automatic fight or flight response instead of thinking things through.

And unfortunately the church is not immune to this. In fact since the church really is a "hospital for sinners" it should not surprise us that there are many anxious people in the church, and this sometimes affects our life together.

Anxious congregations sometimes have vicious conflicts that cause terrible pain, and even Steinke who does conflict resolution for a living is amazed and appalled by the intensity of some clashes.

Problems are created where there seem to be no good answers, and people begin to wonder why they even went to church in the first place.

In situations like these Steinke tells these congregations not to "waste their pain." In other words instead of running away from this difficult situation or going to war use it as a means to grow both personally and spiritually.

The cross is about the sacrifice Jesus made for us once and for all. But, according to the Bible, the cross is also something we take up voluntarily as we follow Jesus. It is a daily sacrifice, a discipline that guides our life together. It keeps our suffering from being wasted. Instead our suffering is transformed into glory.

ON THE ROAD TO THE CROSS

Next week we're in the first Sunday of Lent. We're back in the wilderness with Jesus as he faces the wild animals.

The news will not get any better as we walk that road that leads to the cross. The wild animals will be followed by angry mobs, self-righteous and vicious religious leaders, self-serving and dangerous political leaders, and disciples who run away at the first sign of real trouble.

And the bad news we read in the Bible will undoubtedly be mirrored by bad news we read in the newspaper. Anxiety provoking events like wars and rumors of war will make the headlines every day. We will face an uncertain financial future. Many of us will struggle with the pain of sickness and personal demons that refuse to leave us alone.

But, the road to the cross reminds us that this suffering doesn't have to be wasted. There's a glory coming that beats even our best mountain top experience. There's a glory coming that will change everything. There's a resurrection coming, a new life that cannot be stopped by even death.

Whatever we say about glory must always be viewed through the lens of the cross and the resurrection. We must listen to Jesus and let his words interpret our lives. Glory is not what we achieve and build; glory is what God reveals in Jesus Christ.

Someone once said that a good definition of Christian worship is this: "Worship is our risky, faltering attempt to let God be who God is rather than who we might like God to be."

I think that's true, and I also think that this is a difficult thing to do. But, perhaps we could come a bit closer to acceptable worship by realizing that the true glory of God is found not so much on the mountaintop but in the valley of human need below.

DESCENDING TO THE VALLEY

Some scholars suggest that we cut off the story of the Transfiguration too soon. They suggest that we should also read about what happens after Jesus goes down the mountain, how he brings healing and hope to those with broken hearts and broken bodies.

In this ministry, in this service to those on the underside of life, we see the true glory of God. It is a glory that is greater than the law and the prophets. It is a glory that is greater than even the most mystical and powerful of visions.

Henry Drummond, the Scottish theologian said,

"God does not make the mountains in order to be inhabited... It is not God's desire that we live on the mountaintops.

We only ascend to the heights to catch a broader vision of the earthly surroundings below... The streams begin in the uplands, but these streams descend quickly to gladden the valleys below."

I think that God would have us descend from the mountaintop like a life-giving stream. Again I come back to Matthew's gospel and that powerful statement about where we find the presence of Jesus in the world. We find Jesus hidden in the lives of those who have the most need. When we help the least among us, we find presence and glory of Christ. (Matthew 25:40)

The Vietnamese tell a folk tale that is a good way of understanding the glory of God that is revealed in Jesus Christ.

The Vietnamese people say that there is only one difference between heaven and hell. In hell the chopsticks are three feet long and people can't eat. In heaven the chopsticks are also three feet long, but the people feed each other!

The purpose of worship is not to protect us from the world. The purpose of worship is to change the way we live in the world. We want a religion that comforts us rather than challenges us. But, that is not the faith we find when we really listen to Jesus.

Real faith is not about building great temples or shrines. Real faith is about speaking for and being with the poor, the helpless, the voiceless and the forgotten.

Real faith is not about transcending life on a high mountain somewhere. Real faith is about transforming life by putting into practice the simple yet difficult teachings of Jesus.

Let us once again join Jesus as he descends from the mountain and undertakes that long difficult journey to Jerusalem. Let us once again experience the peculiar glory of the cross. Let us take up our cross and follow Jesus.

Amen.