

**“Glory Interrupted”**

February 26, 2017

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Matthew 17:1-9

1 Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and his brother John and led them up a high mountain, by themselves. 2 And he was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became dazzling white.

3 Suddenly there appeared to them Moses and Elijah, talking with him. 4 Then Peter said to Jesus, “Lord, it is good for us to be here; if you wish, I will make three dwellings here, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.”

5 While he was still speaking, suddenly a bright cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud a voice said, “This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!”

6 When the disciples heard this, they fell to the ground and were overcome by fear. 7 But Jesus came and touched them, saying, “Get up and do not be afraid.” 8 And when they looked up, they saw no one except Jesus himself alone.

9 As they were coming down the mountain, Jesus ordered them, “Tell no one about the vision until after the Son of Man has been raised from the dead.”

## GIVING UP GLORY

I like to celebrate holidays that no one else celebrates.  
Most of my holidays center around food.

For example, I celebrate Taco Tuesday at Tijuana Flats. I celebrate wonderful Wednesday at Outback Steak House.

And so forth.

And today I get another opportunity to celebrate.

This is Transfiguration Sunday.  
I'm going to eat out after today's sermon to celebrate!

Better eat out now because Ash Wednesday is coming.

No more celebrating.  
The season of Lent is on the way.

And pretty soon people are going to be asking me,  
"What are you going to give up for Lent this year?"

Are you going to give up candy?  
Are you going to give up ice cream?  
What are you going to give up for Lent?

I've decided what I'm going to give up for Lent.  
Broccoli.

I know.  
It'll be a real sacrifice.  
But, somebody's got to do it. Right?

Actually, God does ask the disciples to give up something in our lesson for today.

He doesn't ask them to give up broccoli.  
He doesn't even ask them to give up fried foods or ice cream.

He asks them to give up glory, at least to give up glory as they understand it.

You see, the disciples wanted, more than anything else, to make Israel great again.  
That was what the disciples wanted the Messiah to do. That was their definition of glory.

But, Jesus had a different vision of glory.  
It would be the glory of the cross.

## GLORY DAYS REFLECTED

Today's vision begins with a scene that is reminiscent of glory days of the past.

Matthew tells us that Jesus' face shone like the sun. You'll remember that this was what Moses looked like after he received the law on Mount Sinai.

Also, Jesus' clothes became dazzling white. Whenever God's messenger, God's angel appears in the Bible, that's how they're dressed. Dazzling in white.

So Jesus on this mountaintop looked like Moses after he received the law or even an angel.

And if that wasn't enough to get the message across, Jesus was joined on that mountaintop with two other luminaries from the past, Moses and Elijah.

You'll remember that both of those guys had also experienced the power of God on the mountaintop. And they were talking with Jesus.

What were they talking about?  
We don't really know.  
The Scripture doesn't say.

You may have noticed that our anthem for today speculated on that. It suggested that they were speaking to Jesus about the coming days, a time of great sorrow and destiny.

Maybe. That seems like a good guess.  
It fits in with the rest of the story.

## SHRINE BUILDING

But, the disciples didn't hear what they were saying. I have my own theory as to why they didn't hear.

Despite the appearance of divine glory, the disciples weren't listening. Amazingly, even in the presence of glory, the disciples are still more interested in talking than listening.

Peter especially was never at a loss for words ... even when he doesn't know what to say.

And so out of ignorance Peter begins to give his thoughts on what they should do.

They should preserve this place of glory.

It was good to be on the mountaintop so he suggested that they stay right there.

They could build three shrines to commemorate the event ... one for Moses, one for Elijah and one for Jesus.

We shouldn't be too hard on Peter.

After all the building of shrines to commemorate a special revelation was a well established practice.

For example, do you remember when Jacob stole his brother Esau's birthrate and had to flee to his uncle's home?

On the way Jacob spent the night in the desert. He took a stone for a pillow, and as he slept on that rock he had a dream, a vision.

Heaven came down to earth.

And God promised to take care of Jacob and make of him a great nation.

So Jacob made a homemade shrine. Jacob anointed the stone on which he slept and renamed the place (formerly known as Luz) Beth-el ... the house of God.

God was in that place in a special way, and that story needed to be commemorated.

For years after this, people went to that place.

They remembered and told the story.

That land was holy land, the house of God.

Throughout the Promised Land there were markers and special names that commemorate the mighty acts of God and the journey of faith.

Perhaps Peter thought that this mountaintop needed a special marker as well.

The glory that the disciples saw needed to be remembered and celebrated by future generations.

Indeed, since we're talking about it today, to a certain extent that happened.

### A HOLY PERSON AND NOT A HOLY PLACE

But, here's the problem with building a shrine.  
A shrine emphasizes the holiness of a place.  
It's the "standing on holy ground" idea.

But, the important thing about this mountaintop experience was not the place.

The important thing was the person.

God was not coming to the disciples in a place.  
God was coming to the disciples in a person.  
God was in Christ.

It was Christ whose face shone like the sun  
It was Christ who took on the appearance of an angel.

It was Christ in whom the Word became flesh.

Erecting shrines did not always help the people see the glory of God.  
Indeed, shrines could become a distraction.

In fact, the shrines on the high places often contributed to the idolatry of God's people.

You may remember that throughout the Old Testament, God warns His people about their attachment to the "high places" and their fascination with foreign gods.

People have always wanted to build shrines on the mountaintop. And often this fascination with the high place led to the worship of false gods.

## THE WORK OF GOD IN THE VALLEY

The vision of glory may occur on the mountain.  
But, more often than not, the work of God happens in the valley.

The work of God happens where broken and hurting people are healed  
The work of God happens where justice and mercy prevail.  
The work of God happens where people deny themselves for the sake of others.

And, as we will see in the weeks to come, the greatest glory is not revealed on a mountaintop.  
The greatest glory is revealed on the cross.

This was not glory as the disciples understood it.  
And this is not glory as we understand it either.

We are still a mountaintop people.

Like Peter we want to build shrines and commemorate special events.

But, God's work is not done in the rarified air of the mountaintop.  
Most of the time God's work occurs in down to earth service.

Glory comes in some very inglorious places.  
Jesus told his disciples that glory comes when we deny ourselves and take up a cross.  
Glory comes when we make sacrifices in the name of Jesus.

Any other definition of glory is a deception.

## IDOLATRY

My favorite John Calvin quote is when he said that men and women are "virtual idol factories".  
We can take anything, even good things, and turn them into an idol.

We can turn love into an idol.  
 We can turn patriotism into an idol.  
 We can turn religion into an idol.

Idolatry means giving ultimate allegiance to something that is not worthy of that allegiance.  
 Idolatry is making people or things into “mini-gods”.

Idolatry is worshipping on the high places and sometimes even worshipping the people who live on those high places.

(This, by the way, is behind the worship of celebrity that is so prevalent in our culture.

And that’s why we give so much attention to those who have political power. We worship the people on the mountaintop.)

God loves us too much to let us make this mistake.

The voice of God interrupts our lives and points us in a new direction.

The voice of God leads us down the mountain.

That’s what happened to Peter.

**LISTEN!**

The Bible tells us that while Peter was still speaking, he was interrupted with a word from above.

A bright cloud overshadowed them and voice proclaimed,

“This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!”

That voice might sound familiar to you.

Remember when we read the story of Jesus’ baptism to begin the season of Epiphany?

Same voice. Very similar message.

Except in today’s passage one line is added.

“Listen to him!”

If God was in Christ, if Jesus is the Son of God who does the will of the Father,  
what is the most important thing that we can do?  
“Listen to him.”

We all have a problem with listening.  
We don't do it.  
Like Peter, we prefer to speak.

But, the voice from heaven changed things for Peter and the others.  
They were forced to listen.

How do the disciples respond to this voice from heaven?  
They are terrified.  
They are so frightened that they fall to the ground.

#### A HARD MESSAGE TO HEAR

Part of the disciples' fear can be attributed to the appearance of the holy.  
In the Bible whenever God appears people are overwhelmed by that appearance.

But, I wonder if at least part of that terror is also due to the message that Jesus preached.  
If we really listen to Jesus, we might not like it.

The disciples had been listening to Jesus before they ascended the mountain.  
And they certainly were not pleased with what he had to say.

In the passage that precedes our lesson for today, Jesus predicts his Passion, that is his death and resurrection.

And Peter, the one who wanted to preserve the glory on the mountaintop, was horrified by what Jesus had to say. In fact, Peter even took Jesus aside and began to rebuke him.

“God forbid that something like this happen,” he said.

But, Jesus in turn rebuked Peter.



He even called Peter's rejection of the cross and the resurrection the work of Satan.

Peter's words were a stumbling block to Jesus.  
Peter was setting his mind on human things instead of divine things.

In other words, the glory of God was going to be quite different from the glory of the world.

The disciples needed to set their mind on the words and way of Jesus as opposed to adopting the ways of the world.

And then Jesus made the message even more difficult when he told would be disciples to take up their cross and follow him.

Those who wanted to save their life would lose it. And those who lost their life for Jesus would save it. It would do them no good to gain the whole world and yet lose what was really important in life.

That was a hard message for the disciples to hear.  
It frightened them. And when you read the gospels, you find that the disciples were really good at ignoring the message of the cross.

"Okay, Lord, enough of this cross stuff.  
When are you going to make Israel great again?"

Even after the resurrection the disciples still nurtured this misconception.  
In the first chapter of the Book of Acts Jesus is about to ascend to heaven.

And what do the disciples ask?  
"Lord, is now the time that you will restore the kingdom of Israel?"

Despite all that has happened they still look at Jesus as the Messiah who will restore national pride and fortune.

They still see Jesus as the one who will make Israel great again.  
They are still blind to the greater salvation that Jesus brings.

It is not just salvation for a part of the world.  
It is salvation for the whole world.

In today's lesson the message of the cross and the resurrection comes into focus for the disciples, at least for a moment. On the mountaintop in the presence of glory, the disciples are forced to hear what they do not want to hear.

And so they fall on their faces in terror when the voice from above tells them to "listen".

Salvation begins with fear and trembling.

Salvation begins when we recognize our sinfulness in the presence of Almighty God.

Salvation always begins when God tells us to listen to Jesus.

Salvation begins when God tells us what we do not want to hear.

## TOUCHED BY GRACE

But, fear is not the end of the story.

Notice what happens next.

This scene of divine challenge gives way to a word of grace.

Jesus touched his disciples.

And then he said, "Get up and do not be afraid."

What can help when we are afraid?

Someone to reach out and touch us.

Whenever there is a tragedy, notice how people hug each other.

Human touch can calm our fears.

God in Christ touched the disciples.

And that human touch conveyed a divine message.

We are not alone.

God is with us and for us.

One commentator pointed out that the Transfiguration also foreshadows Easter.

When the disciples fall to the ground, Jesus commands them not just to stand up but literally “to be raised.”

The Spirit of the risen Christ will transfigure these frightened disciples into powerful witnesses for the gospel. They will die to the old life and be raised to new life in Christ.

But, that will have to wait for another day.

As they were going down the mountain Jesus told his disciples not to tell anyone about this vision “until the Son of Man has been raised from the dead”.

Only a resurrection will reveal the truth to these disciples.

And only the Spirit of the risen Christ can make them into the disciples that they are truly called to be.

We live on the other side of the resurrection, but often our actions suggest that we are not listening to Jesus. Sometimes it seems that we are more into shrine building than kingdom building.

But, be advised; our building projects and our five year plans are subject to divine interruption.

And during those times of disruption, disappointment and even fear ... we learn the truth.

The kingdom of God cannot be built out of brick and mortar.

The kingdom of God can only be built by people who listen to Jesus. The kingdom of God can only be built by people who have been touched by Jesus and reach out and touch others in his name.

The kingdom of God is not about what we want.

The kingdom of God is about what God wants.

## JESUS IS WITH US ALWAYS

One last thing about this passage.

When Moses and Elijah are gone and when the voice from heaven is quiet, Jesus is still there.

When the glory fades, Jesus has a word of comfort and hope for his disciples.

“I’m here. Get up. Don’t be afraid.”

The disciples will need this vision of glory and comfort to get them through the days ahead.

Pretty soon things will become dark indeed, and it will seem like they are all alone.

But, not even death will be strong enough to prevent Jesus from keeping his promise.

He will be with them.

And on another mountaintop Jesus will gather all of his disciples and promise to be with them always ... even until the world comes to an end.

Many of us have had mountaintop experiences.

They can be important spiritual markers in our journey of faith.

And all of us know what it means to live in to the valley where things go wrong.

But, the important point is this:

On the mountaintop, in the valley and all those places in between ...

Jesus is there ...

... reaching out to us

... touching us

... raising us up

... giving us the new life that we so desperately need.

Let us trust in that promise as we make our journey.

Amen.