

Blinded by the Light of Your Glory

Mark 9:2-9

Transfiguration Sunday, February 22, 2009

Whitefish UMC

- † Glory. It's not a word you hear much, except in sports, military settings, or sometimes the church. It's a word gone out of favor; it's old fashioned. People just don't name their little girls "Gloria" anymore, do they?
- † Does that word, "glory" have real meaning for us? In our contemporary culture, think of two films. First, the movie "Glory Road" reminds us that the glory of a championship comes at the end of a long, hard climb.
- † In case you don't remember the story, Texas Western University fields a team of all African American basketball players, against the wishes of many alumni and the college basketball world. Through perseverance, vision, courage, and hard work, they team ends up competing against the favored University of Kentucky for the NCAA championship.
- † The momentary glory the team and its coaches experienced lives on in our memories because people recognized its groundbreaking significance. How could anyone watch that upset game and not feel a glorious joy?
- † Some years ago, a wonderful movie called, simply, "Glory" told the story of African American soldiers during the Civil War. In both sports and war, glory is hard-won.

- † After suffering and self-sacrifice and extraordinary effort, glory is earned; it is achieved. And it is elusive. Sometimes even with all these Herculean efforts, we are disappointed. And sometimes glory only comes after the fact, when seen with new eyes.
- † In the life of faith, though, glory belongs to God. “Rise, shine, give God your glory, glory!” We’re meant to offer God the glory, the praise, the thanksgiving. And yet we’re meant to experience the glory of God ourselves, even though it ultimately belongs to God.
- † But how? The poet Gerard Manley Hopkins famously says, “the world is charged with the grandeur of God; it will flame out like shining from shook foil.” Is that “flame out” a reference to a transfigured reality charged with God’s glory, God’s grandeur?
- † Speaking of Transfiguration, let’s take a moment to revisit the mountaintop glory experience in Mark’s gospel that our Mark just read. It’s a strange story indeed, one that just doesn’t quite seem to fit in the Gospel message.
- † There is Jesus in the midst of his busy ministry, teaching and healing, and suddenly he has taken his core disciples up to the mountain where this strange scene unfolds. Jesus’ face and clothes are shining like the sun, and these heroes from ancient history, Moses and Elijah, appear.
- † And Peter, James, and John are understandably terrified. The voice of God commands them: “This is my Son, the Beloved, listen to him!” Then, just as suddenly, it’s all over and they are back down the mountain in the midst of the ordinary challenges of life. In fact in the very next section of Mark’s gospel, the disciples are met with the demand to heal a boy gravely afflicted with seizures.

- † They struggle to heal the boy, but they can't, angering the crowds and provoking Jesus. How quickly life returns to normal after a mountaintop experience. Did the disciples remember their experience of the transfigured Jesus? Or had the glory faded from their memory?
- † What are we to make of this story? Do *we* experience the glory of God? Or is this passage an Easter resurrection story that has ended up in the wrong part of the Gospel, is out of sequence?
- † Some of us, in trying to explain stories like this, or in dismissing them as quaint myths from an ancient time, miss the point. For many people, religion is a matter of intuition or opinion. It's the "heart's best hunch," as Richard Lister says.
- † In a recent survey of church goers, a majority said that the church is very important, but most of that majority said the church should "never try to influence my thought or behavior."
- † That is to say, the church provides a place to gather, to support, but when you blow out the candles and close the door, true religion follows the gravitational pull of ME. It's the heart's best hunch. As one of those surveyed said, "My religion is my own little voice."
- † Sometimes I am guilty of reducing God to what Lister calls a "God-wink." A God-wink is a coincidence—a transitory clue that there may be someone out there trying to communicate with us.
- † For example, just as you make a difficult decision, the sun breaks through the clouds as if to confirm it. Coincidence or message from God? A bluebird lands on your window sill as you are pondering a marriage proposal. That must mean something, right? And what if it's a crow? We've all had God-winks.

- † And yet is God just a benign confirmation of our own best instincts? Some of us come here this morning in grief that is really too much to bear. Some of us come facing illness, either for ourselves or someone we love. Some of us come with a heart tormented by guilt.
- † And all of us are uncertain about what comes next. And it is here, we're here, because we need more than a hunch. As Lister says, "Why settle for a wink, when you can have a vision?"
- † Mark's gospel sees a history much bigger than most of us can imagine. He tells of a journey of mountains and valleys, of rough places made plain. He tells of a journey of suffering, struggle, abandonment, and even death. Jesus' disciples don't want to hear of it. They want to hear only of glory, of the kingdom of God come on earth as it is in heaven.
- † And we can understand. John Vannorsdall tells the story of a soldier on a battlefield in the Western Front during World War I. Shells are bursting, handsome bodies are mangled beyond hope. Grownup men wail like babies, and a young man, no more than a boy himself, tells a comrade, "We weren't meant for this."
- † "We weren't meant for this." Every time we see a loved one suffer; every time we see the faces of grief in war-torn lands; every time we look into the despairing eyes of hungry children, ought we not to think, "We weren't meant for this"?
- † God doesn't solve every personal problem. God tells us what we are meant for. We are meant to live to a different standard, the standard of grace. We are not meant to settle for a wink, but a vision.

- † And not some out-of-date version of a chariot in the clouds or city with gold-paved streets, where we all wear crowns and dress like kings and queens. Jesus makes it clear.
- † His is a healing vision, especially for those who by the world's standard, do not fit the pattern of God's favor, for they will be included, too. And what about those who are so sick or poor or troubled that religion leaves a bad taste in their mouth, whose success has been cut short, who are lost?
- † Is it too much to see, with God's vision, that they will be included too? Isn't grace bigger than sin, or death, or tragedy?
- † Sometimes, often, we can't see the vision. Maybe we've never seen it. Have you seen God's glory? Thomas Merton, a great mystic and writer of the twentieth century, says: "Life is very simple: we are living in a world that is absolutely transparent, and God is shining through it all the time."
- † But is life that simple? Merton says, "This is not a fable or a nice story. It is true. God manifests himself everywhere, in every thing, in people and in things and in nature and in events. You cannot be without God. It's impossible. Simply impossible."
- † Maybe so. But why is it so hard to see, sometimes, often? Because we get caught up in self-focus, in measuring and comparing and weighing how we stack up against the rest of the world.
- † Merton again: "In Louisville at the corner of Fourth and Walnut I was suddenly overwhelmed with the realization that I loved all these people, that they were mine and I theirs—it was like waking from a dream of separateness."

- † To take your place as a member of the human race. I had the immense joy of being a man—a member of the race in which God himself became incarnate. If only everybody could realize this. But it cannot be explained—there is no way of telling people that they are all walking round shining like the sun.”
- † What if we were to see the glory of God in the people of our lives and our world, shining like the sun? And how is that possible?
- † Perhaps only the poets and composers and painters can really communicate it. But don’t we get glimpses of this glory in the everyday love of our lives?
- † Think of the song, “The Glory of Love.” “You’ve got to give a little, take a little, and let your poor heart break a little. That’s the story of, that’s the glory of love.”
- † In my own life, I treasure those times when I look out into this church as we receive the Sunday offering. You sing some version of a “Doxology.” Did you know that the root of “doxology” is the Greek word for “glory” (*doxa*)? It is then that your faces are transfigured with the glory of God, as you offer yourselves in praise and thanksgiving to God.
- † During the week, I may get frustrated with you, irritated by some of you, and wonder where God is taking me and this church. And then I sing to myself, not some great hymn of the church, but “You’ve got to give a little, take a little, and let your poor heart break a little. That’s the story of, that’s the glory of love.”
- † God means for the glory of love to shine through us, to shine through our world. God means for us to see it, to experience it, and to let it guide us through the struggles, the doubt, the anger, the grief.

- † Our role is to practice seeing. As we come down from the mountain of Transfiguration and into the depths of Lent and Holy Week, may we not be blinded by the light of the glory of God. Instead may we see the Godlight shining in each other's faces, drawing us on to resurrection life.
- † And may our vision not be small, just a wink that is a reflection of US. May our vision be the reign of God, of justice and love, for everyone.
- † Let's close with this provocative poem from Steve Garnaas Holmes, and take it to heart:

Forget the three dwellings, the boxes
in which to put Jesus and the mystery and the power.
Forget the scholarly theories about this,
the proofs, the arguments, even the beliefs.
Just let it knock your socks off,
lay you low with wonder and beauty and,
yeah, even a little terror.
I'll tell you what this story means in simple words:
it's all glorious mystery,
almost more than we can bear, let alone understand.
We don't know what we're talking about.
God is so much more than we can say or know;
Jesus means so much more than we can describe;
there is so much light and glory and Truth with a capital W,
while we try to rise from the fog and get back on top of it all,

that theology is ridiculous and even words themselves are silly.
Just shut up and wonder. Let your mouth hang open.

Let this be your credo:

“Whoa.”

And let this be your faith: just listen.

God is not interested in fancy beliefs. God wants your attention.

Stay open to the wonder and the mystery. Keep watching.

A burning bush, flaming chariots, brilliant Lord,

simple patch of sunlight, human being—

not all at once, perhaps, like this, but over time—

anything may light up your eyes,

transfigure you into pure light and wonder and mystery.

Only then, when the miracle’s left you speechless,

and you’ve come back from the dead,

can you tell.

Amen.

Sources:

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