

Glimpses of Glory  
Matthew 17:1-9

Rev. Tracey Davenport  
February 3, 2008

The story from Matthew's gospel today is incredible. It is mysterious and amazing. Gospels Mark and Luke share the same story and Peter references the event in 2 Peter 1:16-18. What happened is credible, but what happened is unexplainable. Peter, James, and John go up the mountain with Jesus, and he is profoundly transformed before them. They see Jesus' face shine like the sun and his clothes turn to dazzling white, much as Daniel saw him hundreds of years before, and John will see him in the revelation at the end of his life. Suddenly and without warning these three fishermen, who had walked daily with Jesus, caught a glimpse of his complete divine nature, a nature hidden to them day to day. They caught a glimpse of the glory of God.

When Scripture speaks of the glory of God, it speaks of the fullness of who God is. The glory of God is God's power, light, beauty, joy, grace, mercy, patience and love, bound together and presented to us an overwhelming way. God's glory is the sum total of God's perfections. God's glory appears in Scripture as light that illumines all darkness and permeates all other beings. God's glory appears in Scripture as joy and gladness. God's glory is described in Scripture as beautiful, a beauty the Psalmist praises and begs to see. God's glory often appears as fire or as a cloud in which the very voice of God can be heard. God's glory is the total of God's wonderfulness which takes our breath away.

At certain times and certain places God allows us a glimpse of His glory. God occasionally will impose or intrude upon us in such a way that not only is God not overlooked, but is not mistaken for anyone else or again forgotten.<sup>1</sup> In other words, God's glory is God's unmistakable, unanonymous presence, seen, heard, and felt by God's creatures. Moses experienced the glory of God. Peter, James, and John experienced the glory of God. We, at certain times and in certain places, are given a glimpse of glory.

The first thing I notice about the story of the transfiguration is that Peter, James and John went up the mountain with Jesus. Just like Moses, they went up the mountain. They got away from their regular routine to spend time with Jesus alone. **Those who want a glimpse of God's glory must get away and go up the mountain with God.** We must make time to go away from our normal routines to pray, to study, and to worship. Christians often do this surrounded by the beauty of God's creation. Many

“mountain top” experiences, as they are called, happen at a Christian camp, in the mountains, by the ocean, or in the woods. Every year, Presbyterian pastors are given two weeks of study leave. Those two weeks are not just study, but time away from the regular routine to be with God. This summer our youth will get a chance to get away to the mountains of Lexington, Kentucky to work, worship, pray and fellowship. It is those who take this time away who often get a glimpse of God’s amazing glory. We stay so busy, as people and as churches, that often we do not take the time to get away with God. There is no telling what messages we fail to hear from God because we refuse to seek God. God waits patiently for the time to come when we will seek Him out. Scripture promises us that if we truly seek Him, we will find Him.

Secondly, I notice from Matthew’s account of the transfiguration of Jesus that **the proper response when we get a glimpse of God’s glory is to worship and enjoy it, to be still and watch and listen.** We don’t have to do anything but pay attention. These three disciples got to see Jesus changed into the glory of God, talking with Moses and Elijah, the heroes of their faith. Peter, James, and John were able to physically see that Jesus’ coming did not mean the rejection of the law and prophets, as Jesus himself had told them. They got to see the perfect harmony between the old and the new. They saw that Jesus was the goal and fulfillment of a much older story. What can we do when we see something like this, when we are given an astounding revelation?

Peter, as per usual, does something stupid. He felt the need to say something. Peter asks permission to set up three tents. Why in the world would Moses, Elijah, and Jesus need tents? Did Peter, a man of action, just need something to do? He is more comfortable being busy. Was he thinking of the tabernacle in the wilderness? Did he want to make places of worship, so that others could come and enjoy what he was enjoying? Maybe he wanted to prolong this experience and avoid going back down the mountain. Whatever his reason, he was a complete idiot and utterly overwhelmed and confused by what he was seeing. I am not saying I wouldn’t be. I am just stating the facts of this event.

The last time Peter opened his mouth in this gospel, he was sternly rebuked by Jesus telling him, “Get behind me Satan.” There is no rebuke on this occasion for Peter – just an interruption by God the Father affirming the work of the Son. When the disciples heard the very voice of God coming from the cloud that enveloped them, they did the right thing. They fell to the ground in worship.

In some ways, we have lost our sense of awe and holy fear of God. We do not revere God highly. Jesus is our bud, our pal, our best friend. We believe that we can casually enter God's presence. When Loretta Lynn was chided for calling President Carter and the First Lady by their first names, she responded, "I call Jesus by his first name." Yes, we do call Jesus by his first name. But he is God and when we encounter God in all his glory we see Who God is and sense the spectacular difference in God and appropriately fall on our faces in worship, respect and love.

When we get a glimpse of the glory of God, we do not have to say anything or do anything. We just listen and watch and worship and let the experience burn into our hearts and minds. We stand in awe and wonder and praise of our most wonderful God.

And lastly, **the story of the transfiguration reminds us that when we go up to be with God, and when we get a glimpse of his glory, we must come back down the mountain.** I don't know how long their experience lasted, but it seems that almost as soon as it started, it was over. Before the three disciples knew it, they felt the touch and saw their very earthly friend Jesus alone with them. Moses and Elijah were gone. They get down the mountain to find very earthly problems again: inept disciples and a man with an epileptic child begging for their help.

The world did not change while they were up on that mountain. But they should have. The purpose of the transfiguration for these disciples was to shock them out of their habits, to encourage them to pay attention to Jesus, to listen to him and do as he says. A glimpse of the glory of God should sink into our souls and strengthen us. Their glimpse of glory should have convinced them once and for all that Jesus was the Christ, the Son of the Living God, as Peter proclaimed so boldly six days earlier. But you know the rest of the story. When death is threatening, Peter denies Jesus three times. Peter does not trust the vision he had on the mountain top.

There is a lesson for us in Peter's example. We should trust those rare glimpses of God's glory. We should believe the insight, joy, and peace that we gain from those moments and they will help us through times of sadness and doubt. We must live in the world as it is, but don't let it take away the glimpses of glory that we have been given. Don't let any event erase the powerful feeling, the perfect joy, love, and peace that a glimpse of God's glory will bring.

In Dietrich Bonhoeffer's *Letters from Prison*, he tells of a young man in the cell next to him, weeping continuously day and night. He finds out from the guard that the man is to be executed by the Nazi's.

Bonhoeffer calls to the young man through the cement wall, asks him to place his hands on the other side of the wall, exactly where his are, and leads him in this prayer to the Lord: *It's dark in me; in you is day. I am alone; you always stay. I am afraid; you never cease. I am at war; in you is peace.* Those two men saw nothing out of the ordinary and yet felt something so overwhelming they could not speak and could hardly stand. The young man next to Bonhoeffer continued to shed tears, but they were different now. The sobs of despair were replaced by tears of joy; the panic in his heart and mind blown away by peace. In that dark, cold prison cell, that young man, with the guidance of the faithful pastor, experienced a glimpse of the glory of God. The guards were astounded at how calm the young man was the next morning when he was led before the firing squad.

It is those rare, wonderful times in my life when I have been overwhelmed by God's glory that have gotten me through the hard times, the boring or tedious times, and the doubtful times in my ministry. I believe I experienced the glory of God this week, as Ron Thomson and I were visiting with Phil Bailey at Arundel House of Hope. He was explaining to us how more and more women need winter shelter and how some churches won't take women. As he told an intricate story of God's provision and a church's compassion, how everything worked out miraculously so that women did not have to be turned away, I noticed we all were smiling so big at each other, rejoicing in our hearts at the miracle of scheduling which occurred, and I was overwhelmed by a sense of the faithfulness and love of the Lord. I could feel it in that room. So when the stress and inevitable minor emergencies of hosting a winter shelter pop up for our church, I will remember that the Lord is near, and good, and working.

If you have ever felt overwhelmed by God's grace; if you have ever shed tears of pure joy; if you have ever been surrounded by supernatural strength and power; if you have ever been strangely warmed by a radiance of unknown origin; if your heart has ever overflowed with love; if you have ever known an unexplainable peace, then you have gotten a glimpse of the glory of God. If you have never felt it, take some time away to experience it. Worship and enjoy all the wonderfulness of our God. And when you come back down, trust and don't forget it, for you will need that glimpse of glory to carry you through, until the day that we see fully and dwell with the glory of God forever.

---

<sup>i</sup> Barth, Karl. Church Dogmatics: II.1 The Doctrine of God.