

Sermon by Rev. Dr. Michael J. Hoyt
Glenshaw Presbyterian Church
Transfiguration Sunday
February 3, 2008

You Are the Glory of God

Exodus 34: Matthew 17:1-9

This summer, when we travel to Scotland on sabbatical,
I'm looking forward to experiencing a bit of Celtic culture.
In their spirituality, the Celts believed in what they called "thin places",
locations in the topography of earth
where the barrier between the earthly world and the spiritual world
is very thin.

Thin places become the locus of revelation, of epiphany, and encounter
with the world beyond.

The most prevalent of these thin places in the Celtic imagination
are mountains and rivers.

(Maybe that's why Steelers football has become something of a religion;
the confluence of three rivers must result in the thinnest of places.

Of course, Pirates baseball would be an argument against this theory.
They seem to be getting very little help from the world beyond!)

Certainly we find this phenomenon played out
in the stories of the Old and New Testaments.

It is in such thin places that God often encounters people,
where revelation and epiphany and wonders of salvation happen:

The crossing of the Red Sea, or of the Jordan River,

The burning bush on Mount Horeb,

The giving of the law on Mount Sinai,

The Baptism of Jesus in the Jordan,

And today, the Transfiguration of Jesus,

up on a high mountain with Peter, James, and John.

But what exactly are we celebrating?

What do we take away from this thin moment

when we behold Jesus, exalted, illuminated,
and flanked by

Moses, the great lawgiver

and Elijah, the great prophet?

Why does it matter for the kingdom of God,
or more mundanely,

what does the Transfiguration mean for you and me today?

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We might begin by remembering the shining face of Moses
as he comes down from his mountaintop encounter with God.

Moses draws near to God, is encountered by the glory.
This he listens to God, receives God's revelation.
And upon his return,
Moses reflects the glory of God for others to see.
Moses becomes a sort of conduit for bringing the glory of God
into the world.

And so in the Gospel of Matthew, when Jesus began to preach,
Matthew says it was to fulfill what was spoken through the prophet,
"...the people who walked in darkness have seen a great light..."
Jesus IS the great light,
but he also passes on the great light,
saying to his disciples, *"You are the light of the world..."*

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The First Question of the Westminster Catechism is:

What is the Chief End of Humankind?

The Answer:

To glorify and enjoy God forever.

That means our Chief Purpose for Being,
our Primary Goal in this earthly life.
But it also means the End toward which we are moving,
the Destination for which we hope,
and End which is not just an End,
but the beginning of Eternity in the brilliance of God's everlasting,
glorious realm.

C. S. Lewis, in his address entitled *The Weight of Glory*,
ponders what glory might mean for us...

He writes,

"Glory suggests two ideas to me,
of which one seems wicked
and the other ridiculous.

Either glory means to me fame, or it means luminosity.

As for the first,

since to be famous means to be better known than other people,
the desire for fame appears to me as a competitive passion
and therefore of hell rather than heaven.

As for the second,
 who wishes to become a kind of
 living electric light bulb?"
Lewis finally concludes it means both: fame and luminosity.
But the fame is not the accolades bestowed by other people.
 rather, it is fame given by God.
It is the total approval and appreciation of God,
 who will say to us,
 "You are my child, in whom I am well pleased."
 "Well done thou good and faithful servant."
For the good child, there is perhaps no greater pleasure
 than in being praised by a loving parent.
This is the matchless joy of our heavenly glory:
 to know ourselves to be children of God,
 and then to receive the unparalleled pleasure
 of being noticed and praised by God.

As for the light bulb;
 there is also some value in thinking of glory as
 brightness, splendor, luminosity.
The biblical imagery suggests that we will "shine like the sun"
 that we will be "given the Morning Star."
Perhaps this means that we will be capable of more than just seeing
 the beauty of God's creation;
 we will be united with it.

Lewis writes:
 "At present we are on the outside of the world,
 the wrong side of the door.
 We discern the freshness and purity of morning,
 but they do not make us fresh and pure.
 We cannot mingle with the splendors we see.
 But all the leaves of the New Testament are rustling with the rumor
 that it will not always be so.
 Someday, we shall get in."ⁱ

But our Chief End is not just about the life to come,
 but has very much to do with this life.
Jesus reveals to us the truly human life.
Jesus perfectly reflected the glory of God's intention for humanity.
 The Chief End of Humankind is to be like Christ.

According to Henri Nouwen
 'The question is not so much, "How to live for the glory of God?"

but, "How to live who we are, how to make true our deepest self?"

Nouwen says our daily mantra should be: "I am the glory of God." ii

I am the glory of God.

You are the glory of God.

Wherever you are, there the glory of God abides.

How can we be fully and truly human, fully and truly ourselves
in every moment, every word, every act?

And can we then learn to see others

as having that same potential –

just on the verge of bursting forth with the glory of God?

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Sometimes seeing and believing in God's glory in us
is beyond the greatest reaches of our imagination.

That is because, like Jesus and his disciples,

we live in a world of pain and suffering, sin and brokenness,
a world that seems the absolute opposite of glory.

It is no coincidence that the Transfiguration happens

Just before Jesus begins his journey to Jerusalem.

Sunday is the Last Sunday in the Season of Epiphany.

This Wednesday, Ash Wednesday,

we enter the 40 days and 40 nights of Lent.

And we begin the journey with Jesus and his disciples
to Jerusalem and to the cross.

I have walked with many of you on your roads to Jerusalem.

This week I knelt beside Pearlene Meyers bed in the stroke unit.

Last week I visited with Sue Hahn

and listened to her speak of trying to catch her breath,
after her second lung surgery.

We all ache with Wayne Maier as he begins his radiation treatment,
which is sure to be right painful before it is over.

On Friday, I stood beside Bill Cantafio and his sister
at the deathbed of their mother
who died quietly in her sleep.

At the other end of the life-cycle,

there is the relentless challenge of caring for children,
particularly for all these wintertime infants and toddlers,
with colds, and ear infections, and sleepless nights,
and parents who still have to function during the day.

Our human experience seems hopelessly removed from
the shining faces of Moses and Jesus
and clothes that become dazzling white.

But remember, Moses came down from the mountain
to find the people worshiping the golden calf.

And Jesus came down from this mountain
to begin his journey to cross.

This is the key to the Transfiguration.

You see, this scene on the mountaintop
has a darker twin, on another mountain,
called Golgotha, called Calvary.

The brilliance of the Transfiguration
begins to darken under an ominous shadow.

Light and glorification is replaced by darkness and humiliation
The scene is changed from Private Epiphany to Public Spectacle

from Jesus flanked by two giants of faith
to Jesus flanked by two criminals
from three men looking on: Peter, James, John
to three women looking on:

Mary, Mary Magdalene,
and the mother of James and John.

from the voice of God declaring Jesus to be the Beloved Son,
to the voice of the Roman Centurion declaring
"Truly this was the Son of God." ⁱⁱⁱ

And the mystery of the gospel is this:

God's glory is no less present at the cross on Golgotha
than on the Mount of Transfiguration.

Even in the darkness of crucifixion,
God's glory abides.

Even on your darkest day, your darkest hour,
the promise and assurance of resurrection remains.

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And so we confess as we come to this table.

Here where we break the bread of Christ's broken body,
and share the cup of Christ's blood spilled for us,

here God's glory abides.

The Lord who stood in brilliance on the mountaintop,
and who was lifted up forsaken on the cross,
invites us to come just as we are
to this table,
where God meets us with a message of grace:
you are my beloved child;
you are my glory.

Jesus invites us here to this thin place
to be strengthened to go out again,
to take up the journey again,
and by our lives, our words and deeds, our choices,
to be the light of the world,
the glory of God.

In this hope, let us keep the feast.

ⁱ C. S. Lewis, *The Weight of Glory and Other Addresses* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1949), p. 8-13.

ⁱⁱ Henri J. M. Nouwen, *The Genesee Diary: Report from a Trappist Monastery* (New York: Doubleday, 1981; Image ed. 1989), pp. 70-71.

ⁱⁱⁱ Dale Allison & W. D. Davies, *Matthew 8-18*, International Critical Commentary (London: T & T Clark, 1991), pp. 684-707.