

Psalm 99
Luke 9:28-43a

Transfiguration of the Lord
Midway Presbyterian Church
February 27, 2022

They Saw His Glory

Introduction to the Psalm

In our psalm today we hear praise for God, king of the universe, and above all people. God is enthroned upon the cherubim—the heavenly angels. Everyone should tremble before God and praise him for his holiness and fairness. The God we worship is not removed from the needs of his people. Listen to these words from Psalm 99...

Introduction to the Gospel Lesson

The specific instance of God's glory that we celebrate this Sunday is, of course, the transfiguration of Jesus. Peter would simply like to build booths, or dwellings, and stay on the mountain. But Jesus has other plans. Listen to these words from Luke 9:28-43a...

Sermon

Mountains have played an important role in the religious history of individuals and cultures all over the world. My family and I have found great enjoyment going to Montreat, at Black Mountain, North Carolina. We also like to hike at Paris Mountain, just five miles north of Greenville. Transforming events have happened on mountains since the beginning of time. In the Judeo-Christian tradition, Mt. Ararat was the site of God's covenant with Noah. It was on Mt. Sinai that Moses received the Ten Commandments. Mt. Horeb was where he met God in the burning bush. It was also Mt. Horeb where Elijah had fled and where God spoke to him—not in the wind, or earthquake, or fire—but in the silence after the storm, in a still small voice.

However, mountaintop experiences don't last indefinitely. Sooner or later their glow and glory fade into the reality of the ordinary. Such experiences offer inspiration, strength, vantage

point, relief, challenge; but, in the journey of faith, they offer no stopping place. The mountaintop moments of Christmas and Easter live in our memories and warm our hearts. The same with Sunday worship. But people do have to go back to work, or go back to the ordinary of our routine.

So it is that in our sacred journey there is no permanent stopping place. Change is the context and the nature of the human pilgrimage. We change. Perhaps you have looked at family pictures recently and noticed how much people have changed—children, parents, grandparents, friends. A while back, Hazel and I went to my high school reunion in Jackson, Mississippi. I can tell you—I wasn't the only one with gray hair (but at least I had hair; some of my classmates were not so fortunate). Well, things change. Often we laugh. Sometimes we cry. But we change.

Relationships change, too. Even those that are for better or for worse. While honeymooners elicit positive feelings from most of us, not many of us would claim that the honeymooner's love for each other runs to the depths of the love of a husband and wife who, for twenty, thirty, forty years or more, have walked side by side on mountaintops and in valleys—in joy and in sorrow, in plenty and in want, in sickness and in health.

In his account of the Transfiguration Luke says that,

Just as they were leaving him, Peter said to Jesus, "Master, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah"—not knowing what he said. (9:33)

The danger of mountaintop experiences is that we want to stay on the mountain.

It is said of those who have a "near-death experience"—that some experience warmth, serenity; seeing a bright glorious light and that they are reluctant to go back to life as we know it, but understand that they must, that there are still things to be accomplished.

Long ago in a small European village, there lived an old man whom everyone considered infinitely wise. Whenever the villagers needed advice, they came to the old man's door and knocked. In the same village lived a number of rough young men. The young adults came to resent the old man, for he had so often been correct in his counsel. And for once, they were determined to prove him wrong.

So the young ruffians caught a bird and decided to ask the old man whether the bird was dead or alive. If he said it was dead, the one holding the bird would let it fly away. If he said it was alive, then the one holding it would squeeze it to death before opening his hands. They went to the old man's house and said, "Old man, we have an important question to ask you. Is this bird dead or alive?" The old man thought for a minute, then answered: "It's all in your hands."

Another wise man once said, "Hold all things lightly, or you will leave no room for God to work." So don't hold on too tightly to that mountaintop experience.

But with our faith grounded in the God of scripture, the God we have come to know in Jesus Christ, and knowing that we have more to accomplish, we can go down the mountain into the valley of the daily life, sure that through the Holy Spirit, God is there too, present and powerful and compassionate.

On the mountain, Peter, James, and John saw the glory of Jesus, which is so vividly depicted in the event of the transfiguration and central to New Testament Christology. As the Son of God, Jesus embodies God's presence and glory in the world. In the prologue to his Gospel, John said,

the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory,
the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth" (Jn 1:14)

In Hebrews, Jesus is depicted as the "radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of God's being" (Heb. 1:3). Then there is that grand vision in the book of Revelation, in which the

glory attributed to the Lamb (Rev. 5:12-13) is on par with the glory of God (Rev. 4:9-11). But that glory is not independent of Jesus' sacrifice and suffering for us and our salvation.

In his letter to the Philippians, Paul said:

Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,
 who, though he was in the form of God,
 did not regard equality with God
 as something to be exploited,
 but emptied himself,
 taking the form of a slave,
 being born in human likeness.
 And being found in human form,
 he humbled himself
 and became obedient to the point of death—
 even death on a cross.

Therefore God also highly exalted him
 and gave him the name
 that is above every name,
 so that at the name of Jesus
 every knee should bend,
 in heaven and on earth and under the earth,
 and every tongue should confess
 that Jesus Christ is Lord,
 to the glory of God the Father. (2:5-11)

My friends, if we have eyes to see, there is the glory of God revealed in a church member's outpouring of time, talent, and treasure. There is the glory of God in a person's visiting the sick, feeding the hungry, helping the poor. There is the glory of God in raising and teaching children and young people. There is the glory of God in music sung to God's praise, flowers offered to beautify God's temple, care offered to maintain God's buildings and grounds.

Some say that ours is a society with lots of movement, even highly productive, but lacking in passion. You know, busyness is not necessarily a sign of passion. It may disguise a lack of passion. As active as he was, Jesus does not appear in the pages of the New Testament as a "busy" person. He appears as a person with passion and purpose, engaged in the human drama.

In the midst of clamoring crowds he attends to individuals as though no one else were around, without any regard to class distinctions. And he withdraws from people to be alone and to engage in prayer with the Father.

But after that glorious experience on the mountain top, Luke says:

On the next day, when they had come down from the mountain, a great crowd met him. Just then a man from the crowd shouted, “Teacher, I beg you to look at my son; he is my only child.” (9:37-38)

And he is sick.

Raphael’s exquisite painting *The Transfiguration* is a better commentary than any words: The Mount of Transfiguration and the pain-filled valley are shown together in one picture. There is a chaotic scene at the bottom of the canvas. Stuck at the foot of the mountain, the disciples cannot cure the sick boy. Frustration is obvious in the outstretched arms and panicked faces of the crowd. In their midst, however, two figures point in the direction of the mountain, toward the sky, in which the transfigured Jesus shines, arrayed in white. This is the same Jesus who will come down the mountain, bringing life and healing to the boy.

For Luke, Jesus is the Savior not only of this sick boy, but of the whole world. Yet sometimes we are tempted to conclude that our world is beyond saving. Disasters persist. Brokenness, sin, and injustice abound. And certainly, the Russian attack on Ukraine is an example of man’s inhumanity to man. Hope can wane even among faithful people. But this Gospel Lesson reminds us of a God who is at work transforming the creation now marked by sickness, suffering, and death. Glimpsed in glory with two great figures of Israel’s past—Moses and Elijah—Jesus is revealed as the culmination of the story of a God who comes, again and again, to heal and to save. Through worship and sacraments, prayer and fellowship, witness and

service, stewardship and work for justice and peace, the reflection of God's glory envelopes weary disciples—even today.

And finally, this from Diane Chen, Professor of New Testament at Palmer Theological Seminary in Pennsylvania:

Christians today have not witnessed Jesus' transfiguration, yet they believe that he is seated in his resplendent glory at the right hand of God. It is the promise and hope of joining Jesus in eternity that sustains believers of all generations through each Lenten and passion season on their own journeys of faith.

At the end of the service today, we will sing a hymn that reflects that hope, "O That Will Be Glory." The first verse and refrain are:

When all my labors and trials are o'er,
And I am safe on that beautiful shore,
Just to be near the dear Lord I adore,
Will through the ages be glory for me.

Oh, that will be glory for me,
Glory for me, glory for me,
When by His grace I shall look on His face,
That will be glory, be glory for me.

Amen. And Amen.