

**What Happens on the Mountain  
Doesn't Stay on the Mountain**  
Luke 9:28-43

Today is the last Sunday after Epiphany, the season of revelation. It began with the wise men and star, and a question about who Jesus was. Now, the wise men didn't know there was a question about Jesus' identity. They thought they knew exactly who Jesus was when they came looking for the one born King of the Jews. They just didn't know what it meant, neither did Herod, but it scared the political wits out of him. Clues have been dropped along the way: at the Temple when he was twelve, at his baptism, in signs done at Cana: certainly they indicate that Jesus was someone special, someone powerful. And they got everyone talking, wondering, speculating. Some were bound to get it wrong, like Herod, who wonders if Jesus is John, come back from the dead, or Elijah, and some get it right, like Peter, who is the first to confess that Jesus is the Messiah.

Luke tells us that today's event, the Transfiguration, comes eight days after that. It will be the ultimate, final revelation and confirmation of Jesus' identity, at least until the resurrection. After today, at least in the minds of Peter, James and John, there will be no doubt. Jesus is God's Son, the Chosen. But more than that, Jesus is God.

According to Luke, it is his glory that gives him away.

Glory is a hard thing to define. Luke, who is never at a loss for words, suddenly gets tongue-tied as he tries to describe the transfigured Jesus; what glory is, and what it looks like. I think I've told you about a professor I had in seminary who called words like that "okra" words. You cut them open to get a good look and they're just all slimy inside. You really have a hard time getting a good grasp of them.

You can always look in an Bible dictionary, but all it will tell you is that "glory" means "weighty" or "important" – not very helpful, is it? That same definition could apply to Donald Trump. Maybe a better way to get at the meaning of "glory" is to look at what happens inside of us when we see manifestations of it – like when you stand at the rim of the Grand Canyon and look down into it and it takes your breath away, or when you look into the perfect face of a newborn baby and your heart does something it's never done before. Maybe God's glory is what the astronauts will think about when they sit in the new observation deck at the space station and look back at the earth and try to take it all in, or gives us shivers at the final notes of an incomprehensibly beautiful piece of music. It's mystery and awe and power and beauty. It is what blinded the Israelites when they saw Moses' face, and turned Peter witless on top of the mountain. God's glory is what sets God apart from us, creator from created, holy from sinful.

But I'd like to suggest is that there is another side of glory. Glory may be what sets God apart from us, but being set apart isn't the same as being distant. I heard an interview this week with a man whose 38-year-old daughter died, leaving behind three children under the age of 6 whom he is now helping to raise. In struggling to grieve and shoulder the burden of this new responsibility he said that he'd really like to be able to yell at God, to blame God, except that the God he

believes in isn't a God who's involved, as he says, "he stands back paring his fingernails," watching things with decided indifference.

That's nothing like the picture that Luke gives us of God, is it? He describes Jesus, Moses and Elijah talking together, radiant and transformed, and he tells us what they were talking about. None of the other gospels do that. It wasn't a "how's it going?" conversation, or encouragement from the other side. Not a holy pep talk. They were talking about his "departure," or literally, his *exodus*, his death. That's what Jesus had just been telling his disciples, only moments after Peter had declared that he was the Messiah. He told them that he would die at the hands of the religious leaders; that he would suffer and be killed. What a stunning blow for the disciples! They see the glory of God in Jesus' face, but they hear about suffering. They see hints of his omnipotence, but they hear that he will give his life for them. God's glory may make us shake in our shoes and render us speechless, but it is also compassionate, gracious, self-sacrificing.

What are we doing when we most reflect God's glory? What are we doing when we most look like God? We were intended to, you know – reflect God's glory – after all, we were created in the image of God. Designed in God's likeness. Not the almighty, all-powerful and all-knowing part, of course; that's where we went wrong. We wanted that too, or maybe instead. But we were created to bear the same qualities of love and compassion and grace and self-giving that characterize God. Like curly hair or a distinct nose, people would be able to look at us and know who we belonged to. But with the apple, we lost that. We lost it the very first time we decided we wanted the weighty and important traits of God, not the loving and self-giving ones. Someday we'll have it back, like Moses and Elijah; we will fully reflect that glory again. But as Paul wrote in the third chapter of 2<sup>nd</sup> Corinthians, the process has already started: "all of us, with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another."

So I ask that question again: what are we doing when we most reflect God's glory? The world needs for us to answer that question, and answer it well.

Why? Because we're fixated on glory, but it's man-made glory. The Donald Trump kind, all about weight and importance and power. We're fascinated with important people, famous people, rich people. We watch their every move, copy their hairstyles, covet glimpses into the inner sanctum of their lives, even their vacation pictures. After Michael Jackson died last summer, were you glued to the TV, and thrilled to get a peek inside his NeverLand mansion? Ever flip through a People magazine in the waiting room of the doctor's office? Other than Angelina Jolie, do you know the name of any of the aid workers who have gone to Haiti?

But none of those people will ever change our lives. None of them love us. None of them will go out of their way to make us a pot of soup, or give us a kidney, or a hug when the chips are down. The glory that comes from power and money and fame may evoke awe and wonder and envy, it might even establish foundations and donate millions, but it keeps its distance. It is indifferent. It does not redeem lives. It does not heal brokenness, or show compassion, or forgive.

The Messiah, the Son of God, the savior of the world, came down from the mountain where he was transfigured and the glory of God shone through him, and he gave a desperate man back his only child. What are we doing when we most reflect God's glory? We are setting aside any importance that the world might attribute to us because of our education, or our income, or the size of our house, and giving ourselves to people who need – time, love, a touch, a meal, a place to stay, a word of forgiveness and hope, a roof over their heads that doesn't leak or let the cold air in.

The world needs to see the glory of God. People like that poor man who lost his daughter need to see God's glory. But where it's best seen isn't at the edge of the Grand Canyon, or in the exquisite scenery around Vancouver, or from the window of the space station. Maybe not even in a spectacular miracle. They don't just need to know that God is awesome, they need to know that God is compassionate, that God is loving. Maybe the best place they can see the glory of God is in the face of someone who is willing to suffer and serve on behalf of another. Someone who is willing to give their lives for someone else. Glory is costly, no doubt about it. Jesus never said it wasn't. But he also said that it was in losing our life that we would find life, and that we would give life. Maybe the angels said it best on the night Jesus was born: Glory be to God in the highest, and on earth, and on earth, peace among all people.