



SUNDAY SERMON

God, Show Me Your Glory

The Gospel according to Matthew, chapter 17, verses 1 to 9.

Six days after Peter had acknowledged Jesus as the Christ, the Son of the living God, Jesus took with him Peter and James and his brother John and led them up a high mountain, by themselves. And he was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became dazzling white. Suddenly there appeared to them Moses and Elijah, talking with him. Then Peter said to Jesus, "Lord, it is good for us to be here; if you wish, I will make three dwellings here, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah." While he was still speaking, suddenly a bright cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud a voice said, "This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!" When the disciples heard this, they fell to the ground and were overcome by fear. But Jesus came and touched them, saying, "Get up and do not be afraid." And when they looked up, they saw no one except Jesus himself alone. As they were coming down the mountain, Jesus ordered them, "Tell no one about the vision until after the Son of Man has been raised from the dead."

Vincent Donovan was a Catholic priest who spent fifteen years among the Maasai in Tanzania during the 1950s and 60s. Donovan tells of a time when he was teaching the Maasai elders about the seven sacraments of the Church. We Episcopalians define a sacrament as an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace. Donovan defined it as a physical encounter in which you experience the Holy; a physical encounter in which you experience the Holy. Despite the elder's respectful attention, he could tell they were not persuaded. Finally, one said, "Seven sacraments? I would expect seven thousand!"

Is not all of creation sacramental? Is not every moment of every day sacramental, revealing, to those with eyes to see, the transcendent holiness of this moment, the very presence of God in this encounter, here, now?

On that mountaintop, Peter, James, and John beheld a vision of the living God. Jesus, whom they knew in flesh and blood, as one who ate and slept and lived among them, with whom they trudged up that very mountain, was—before their eyes—transfigured into radiant light of holiness.

I believe each of us knows more about this experience than we might at first admit—at least in modest ways. I think of the face of my daughter at age five wearing a bright color dress (she always wore bright dresses at that age!) twirling round and round in her bedroom, singing a favorite song. Her eyes and her face shone with the light of holiness.

I think of being in the hospital not long ago with the family of my dear friend, gathered to say goodbye to the man who was our brother, husband, father, friend. Amid the prayers and tears of loss and love, I—and we—beheld transfiguration; aware of being in the presence of the Holy.

I think of those moments when we cannot believe music can be so exquisite. Listening, subsumed within it, our hearts break and we tremble with a sense of awed privilege to be alive in a moment such as this.

Perhaps we wish, as did those disciples, to hold these moments, to make them last indefinitely. But as mysteriously as the moment arises, it passes. And what for a flash was nothing less than the pure presence of God is now just another Tuesday afternoon.

Continued

DATE

The Last Sunday
after the Epiphany
Sun., Feb. 26, 2017

PREACHER

The Rev. Ledlie I. Laughlin

READINGS

Exodus 24:12-18
Psalm 99
II Peter 1:16-21
Matthew 17:1-9

The very first time I went to a monastery and spent three days in silent retreat, I was praying one morning in the chapel, and had the sense of being at the bottom of a well, looking up toward the light. The sides of the well were tiled turquoise as the mosques of Tehran and Isfahan. In the light above I saw a face whom I knew to be Christ. He spoke and said, "I will never leave you." And I found myself alone in the stone chapel, in awe. I closed my eyes again and tried to pray my way back to that moment. I even returned the next day at the very same time to the same spot.

Through each of these and seven thousand other moments of joy, heartbreak or beauty—and here's the crucial thing—in these moments, our life is changed. We are awakened and changed. Because we have seen or felt or known—in our own flesh—the nearness of the holy. And once we know or have seen, we cannot un-know it or un-see it. We know that such a glimpse is possible, that it lies shimmering somewhere beneath.

Now the quest is begun. For me, this is getting very near to the heart of faith. I think about Jesus and what I know about Jesus. I've spent my life in relationship with Jesus. It's not always been a particularly close relationship; for plenty of years I wasn't paying much attention. For other years, I've sought him out daily, almost hourly. I've tried to listen, to follow, to draw others in. It is certainly not a path marked solely with joy, but the more I discover, the deeper the mystery. So, we journey on.

One book of great influence in my life is titled, *The Life of Moses*. It's a classic, written in the year 390 in the Christian Era, by Gregory of Nyssa, one of the pillars and saints of the Church. I don't remember most of the book, but one portion in particular illumines the life of Moses. This morning, we heard about God calling Moses up to the mountaintop, about a cloud of holiness enveloping Moses as he received the tablets of the law. And when he came down forty days later, Moses' face shone with light.

As you know, Moses got to spend some quality time with God, more than most. Long before this mountaintop meeting, Moses witnessed the burning bush, the plagues, the parting of the Red Sea, pillars of cloud by day and fire by night, manna in the wilderness, and so forth. Over time, they got to be pretty close—God and Moses.

One day, having just successfully intervened on behalf of those idolators who'd been worshiping the Golden Calf, God acknowledged that Moses had found favor in God's sight. Moses pressed his advantage: "Show me your glory, I pray." And God said, I will show you. I will make my goodness pass before you, but you cannot see my face, for no one shall see me and live. I'll tell you what, said God—and this is all in the Book of Exodus, chapter 33, over in that rocky hillside, there's a hole. You go stand in the hole in the rocks. And I will pass by. While I do so, I will cover you with my hand until I have passed by; then I will take away my hand, and you shall see my back; but my face shall not be seen."

What Gregory of Nyssa finds alluring about Moses, and I find alluring in Gregory of Nyssa, is this sense that, the more Moses experiences God, the more eager Moses is for God.

Nyssa recalls all the experiences that Moses has had of God's presence and writes (pp.114-115), "although lifted up through such lofty experiences, [Moses] is still unsatisfied in his desire for more. He still thirsts for that with which he constantly fills himself to capacity, and he asks to attain as if he had never partaken, beseeching God to appear to him, not according to his capacity to partake, but according to God's true being."

Nyssa continues: "Such an experience seems to me to belong to the soul which loves what is beautiful. Hope always draws the soul from the beauty which is seen to what is beyond, always kindles the desire for the hidden through what is constantly perceived. Therefore, the ardent lover of beauty, although receiving what is always visible as an image of what he desires, yet longs to be filled with the very stamp of the archetype.

"And the bold request which goes up the mountains of desire asks this: to enjoy the Beauty—i.e., the Holy, God—not in mirrors and reflections, but face to face." "The munificence of God assented to the fulfillment of [Moses'] desire, but did not promise any cessation or satiety of the desire."

I love this! What Nyssa observes in Moses and affirms as the way of salvation is that God reveals to us God's presence—in my daughter's face, through tears in the ICU, or in countless other moments of transfiguration—and we find this is what our hearts most desire, yet even in fulfilling the desire, we are not sated. The desire grows stronger, deeper. Nyssa will say that salvation is not, as some propose, a matter of arriving; salvation is an eternal progression as we move ever further and deeper from one experience of the Holy toward another.

As Moses came down from the mountain, as Peter, James, John and Jesus came down and continued on their way, as we ourselves go about our business in the coming week and this coming season of Lent, we do not go from the holy to the mundane; rather, we go believing that the holy may be revealed and found in any moment of our lives. (With the baptism of young Alexander, the quest for him is now begun, that his life may go from glory to glory).

Sacramental moments are pure gift. We can do nothing to earn or deserve them. Our responses vary. But from joy and gratitude, let us speak of them, share them; let the light of those moments shine through our lives.

One way or another let our prayer each dawn be for eyes and hearts to see the glimmering presence of the holy one in the faces we meet. Not in seven moments, but in seven thousand moments. That our desire be awakened, the quest of faith enjoined, that we may be drawn ever deeper into the heart of God—in this life and in the life to come. Amen.