

Glimpses of glory

—2 Peter 1:16-21

The events atop the mountain of transfiguration happened at the perfect time in Jesus' ministry, just as Jesus had planned. The disciples had seen many glimpses of Jesus' glory as the Son of God. Every time Jesus performed a miracle, they saw a glimpse of his glory. They had watched, as he suspended the laws of physics and brought supernatural healing to people whose bodies were ravaged by infirmity and disease. They were amazed when a few loaves of bread and a few small fishes fed 5,000 people. They couldn't wrap their heads around it when they saw Jesus speak a word, and dead corpses came to life. But here on the mountain, those glimpses of glory gave way to blinding light. For a brief period of time, Jesus pulled off the mask of his humiliation, and he shone with brilliant glory. It wasn't the full display of his glory as the Son of God; that would have left poor Peter, James, and John consumed in a blaze of light. Even as it was, the disciples were stricken with terror and overwhelmed with awe! But Jesus' glory on the mountain was enough to give the terrified men a glimpse of Jesus' true power. Many years later, long after Jesus had completed his work on earth and ascended into heaven, the Apostle Peter wrote, *"To be sure, we were not following cunningly devised fables when we made known to you the powerful appearance of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eyewitnesses of his majesty. For he received honor and glory from God the Father, when the voice came to him from within the Majestic Glory, saying, 'This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased.' We heard this voice, which came out of heaven when we were with him on the holy mountain."*

On the holy mountain, the disciples babbled in fear, as they saw heaven opened. They wanted to stay and bask in the light, but then it was over. Moses and Elijah returned to heaven, Jesus' face and clothing returned to their normal, humble state, and Jesus led the bewildered men back down the mountain. That display of glory was for the disciples' benefit, and they would reflect on it in the days to come. Jesus' glorious meeting with Moses and Elijah atop the mountain was also for his own benefit—to strengthen him for what was coming. Because what was coming next was the culmination of everything Jesus had come to earth to accomplish; he was going to Jerusalem to suffer and die. Peter, James, and John held onto this mountaintop experience, as the coming weeks took them with Jesus to Jerusalem, where on the mountain called Calvary they would see Jesus stripped of all dignity, covered not with blazing glory but with the most degrading shame of crucifixion. On that hill outside of Jerusalem, Jesus was about to be accused of every sin mankind has ever committed. Instead of "well pleased" from the Father, Jesus would hear curses and condemnation from the God who abandoned him to the depths of hell, not because of sins for which he was guilty but because of the guilt of our sins.

After the transfiguration came the journey to the cross. That's why we celebrate Transfiguration when we do in the church year. It is the last Sunday of Epiphany—the last Sunday in which Jesus reveals his true identity as God's Son—before we begin the season of Lent. This Wednesday, Ash Wednesday, we begin the solemn journey that sees Jesus to the cross.

Wouldn't it be awesome to see what Peter, James, and John saw? We would love to see Jesus reveal his glory to us, wouldn't we? We would love to see Jesus appear to us with his face brilliant like lightning, his clothes brighter than the noonday sun. Then we would know for sure that Jesus is Lord and God, because we would see his glory with our own eyes. We might think, "Wow! Wouldn't that be glorious!" But remember the reaction of the disciples. They were terrified! For sinful mortals to be in the presence of the glory of God is a terrifying thing. It reduced Peter, James, and John to irrational babbling. We might think, "But still, what an experience! If I saw Jesus glorified that way, I would be so convinced that he is my God and my Lord. I would never leave his side. I would worship him without question, and I would never doubt him or sin against him again!" But let's remember that even after their experience on the Mount of Transfiguration Peter still denied Jesus, and James and John still scattered in the darkness of the garden and fled in cowardice and fear. No, even with this glorious display of Jesus' glory on the mountain, the disciples still needed to be strengthened again and again. They still needed comfort and forgiveness for their sins.

So as glorious and as wonderful and as encouraging as the Transfiguration was for the disciples who saw it, what those men on the mountain witnessed—blinding light and radiant splendor—is not the way Jesus usually reveals his glory. In fact, the way Jesus usually reveals his glory to us is in exactly the opposite circumstances. In the darkness of Good Friday, in the agony of the crucifixion, in the shame of the cross, in Jesus' death for sinners, God reveals his ultimate glory. Do you understand this? This is one of the greatest paradoxes of our Christian faith—that God's glory is found in the shame and the abandonment of his Son on Calvary. It's found in the foolishness of the cross. When we understand that, then we grasp the truth that God's greatest glory is in his grace. His ultimate glory is in his love for sinners, in his desire to satisfy divine justice with the precious sacrifice of Jesus, and to forgive the wicked, the rebellious, the undeserving—to forgive you and me—and to reconcile us to God. That is power! That is glory! That is

God demonstrating his ability to do what only God can do: to declare wicked people righteous. To say to you and to me, "Your sins are forgiven in Christ! Why? Because in the shame and degradation of Christ crucified I have drowned your sins and iniquities in the depths of the sea! I have separated you from your guilt as far as the east is from the west! I have crowned you with love and compassion, I have covered you with mercy, I have clothed you with garments of righteousness that are as beautiful and glorious as the radiant garments of splendor that Jesus shone with on the mountain. You can't see them yet, but you will when your glorious status in Christ is revealed."

God's greatest glory is revealed in his grace. God's greatest power is revealed in his grace. And where is God's grace revealed? God's grace is revealed in the gospel. God's glory is revealed in the good news that God forgives sinners. God reveals his glory in his Word, the Word of truth. Peter says: *We also have the completely reliable prophetic word. You do well to pay attention to it, as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the Morning Star rises in your hearts, since we know this above all else: No prophecy of Scripture comes about from someone's own interpretation. In fact, no prophecy ever came by the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were being carried along by the Holy Spirit.*

Let's explore what this means. Suppose for a moment that your certainty of salvation depended on how you feel on a given day. Think of the implications of that, if the eternal destiny of your immortal soul depended on you having a glorious revelation or being on an emotional high. Or what if your certainty of salvation depended upon your health? That would be great if you're young and strong like an Olympic athlete, but how would you feel when you become old and frail or when illness or infirmity takes over? Can you see a problem here? Hinging the certainty of our salvation on how we feel or on whether we've had a special spiritual experience would leave us in perpetual uncertainty and unending doubt. Instead, God gives us something much better. The apostle says, "We have the completely reliable prophetic word." We have the Word of God, the promises of God written for us in black and white, unchanging, unwavering, completely reliable. We have the words that God the Holy Spirit himself inspired, the words that God himself breathed into the authors of Scripture, so that we can know with absolute certainty what God's Word is, what his will is, what is promise is, what his forgiveness is, and what our future with Christ is, namely eternal life in heaven. How glorious! Your relationship with Jesus Christ is anchored in God's promises to you, and those promises are given to you in the entirely reliable prophetic Word!

Do you want to see glimpses of God's glory today? Open your Bible. Search the Scriptures. Read the Word. Listen to the gospel that is preached and taught. Taste Jesus in the holy sacrament of Communion. "Oh," we say, "but that's not glorious the way I think of 'glorious.' I want to see something awesome and earth-shattering, the way the disciples did." But remember again, that's not where God usually meets with his people—in emotional highs and mountaintop experiences. He comes to us through the foolishness of what is preached, through the halting words and the stammering tongue and the lisping lips of sinful preachers, who don't even come close to hitting it out of the park most Sundays but speak the Word of God faithfully. And through the foolishness of what is preached God delivers hope and confidence for this life and the next. God comes to us in simple water joined to his Word of promise, and in Baptism he delivers all the blessings of his love. Jesus serves us bread and wine, and to these common elements he attaches his gospel promise, "This is my body. This is my blood poured out for you for the forgiveness of sins." And through this simple means of grace—the gospel in Word and Sacrament—God forgives our sins, drives out our fears, and gives us faith and hope and confidence in Christ that is so powerful that not even the gates of hell can stand against it. In all these simple, humble tokens of God's love we see glimpses of glory that light our path through life.

In Scripture God tells us that he is a God who hides himself (Isaiah 45:15). We can see evidence of God all around us. We can see evidence of his love, his power, his care and protection, his providence in the world—those things about God are on display everywhere. But God's grace, his undeserved love for sinners, his forgiveness for our sins, his victory over death, his promise of eternal life—those things are not found in the rugged mountains or the majestic trees or the pounding surf; they are found nowhere in nature. But they are revealed in the entirely reliable prophetic Word. Search the Scriptures, learn the gospel, and there you will meet God where he reveals himself. You want to see God? Look at Jesus! You want to see Jesus? You'll meet him and he'll speak to you in the Word. "These are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in his name" (John 20:31).

Transfiguration prepares us for Lent, and it prepares us for life. We need these glimpses of Jesus' glory because as Jesus' disciples we are called to take up our cross and follow him. We want to know that we're following someone worth following. Every glimpse of Jesus' glory—every glimpse of his grace, every taste of his forgiveness, every burden of guilt that is lifted, every despondent heart that is encouraged—assures us that Jesus is our Savior, and he is worth following. He is our light in days of darkness. He is our comfort in times of tribulation. He is our confidence in desperate moments. Jesus is our hope beyond this life into eternity, when there will be no more glimpses of glory but God's full glory on display in heaven. Amen.