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43
First Service

Luke 9:28-

THEY SAW HIS GLORY

So, we have a new puppy. It has been a long promised gift for my sons, even though I've never been naïve about this...heck, I was a kid once making the same promises of responsibility to my dad. I knew that most of the work would be for the considerably older people in the house. Kathy and I had a dog when we first got married and he left such an impression on us that we have been in no hurry to replace him. But the perfect storm came to pass and we now have Molly – a yellow lab from the Meyers litter – living with us now.

As the whole family adjusts to this new member, we're all learning new things. I am learning that I have really gotten used to a full nights' sleep since the boys have grown past the nighttime tending stage. The first few nights with Molly weren't timed particularly well since Kathy was also out of town. I sought all kinds of advice for how to get her to sleep through the night and as well intentioned as it was, nothing seemed to help.

My more calloused friends told me to ignore it – don't reward that behavior, they said. If you come, she'll just learn that if she whines and barks long enough she gets you. The problem with that theory is me. Maybe I'm too soft-hearted but every time I heard her cry I remembered that she was away from all of her comforts for the first time. She is just a little baby and her mother and siblings were all gone in one fell swoop and here she is in a strange new house with people she doesn't really know. It's that "bleeding heart" part of "bleeding heart liberal". I had the same problem with my children.

So, I've had to learn to adjust to the life changes a new puppy brings. Oh, how I wanted the puppy to just be perfect – house trained from the get-go, never chewing on the furniture or barking at the air. I wanted her to be a puppy when I wanted it and a statue when I didn't. I wanted all the glory of a dog without so much...dog. But this isn't how it works. Dogs and kids and marriages and relationships are all a bit of glory and a lot of work.

So we'll have moments of the funny contortions of a new dog getting used to her body or the glory of a warm puppy curled up next to you, but we will have far more moments of cleaning up

messes, replacing chewed up shoes or blankets and generally having our relative freedom curtailed by the new member of the household...because that's what relationships are all about. They are some moments of pure glory-filled bliss, but a whole lot more struggle and work and sometimes just plain agony. Relationship is the process of creating things all the time - and even God took seven days to create the world and then rested...because creation is hard work, and glory, my friends, is but a moment on a mountainside.

Too often we see the Raphael painting of this Transfiguration when we think of glory. Lots of angels and a floating Jesus with his arms outstretched to heaven. We think that glory comes only in pretty, glossy packages - beaming with pure, white light. We think that glory is found in jackpot winnings or end zone celebrations or the bright lights of fame and fortune. It's why we can gather millions to support coaches and football programs while at the same time needing to raise students' tuition to pay for faculty and operations of the school. We love glory...we *fund* glory. Just like Peter we think that if things were right we'd just be neck deep in blazing glory all the time. But glory is not confined to mountaintop experiences. If we're open to it, we might just find out that God's glory resides in lots of more level places.

Now when Peter, John & James climbed this mountain with Jesus they had to expect something. After all, they had been set aside from the rest of the disciples and they followed Jesus *up a mountain*, the sure sign in the ancient world that something big is about to happen. Moses gets the encounter with God on a mountain, Elijah encounters the Holy One on a mountain, some people when they need rest and rejuvenation just need to retreat to a mountain...mountains are just closer to God, especially when you think of God as *up there*, a notion which we may not rationally believe, but still give at least lip service to when we say "Our Father *who is in heaven*"...you don't get much more in touch with nature than up on a mountain with very few of the constructs of modern society available, all of the standard safety nets and comforts removed...and for many of us, being in nature is as close to God as we can get precisely because of this - it's a little on edge, a little scary and helps us to feel connected with the gentle wildness that God generates.

It might be enough just to talk about that - the whole mountaintop experience and how it relates to our lives...how we're like the disciples and how Jesus really is the Son of God...just look at the example. We could end with this as merely a vivid example of Jesus' proximity to the Holy One. But that would be a disservice because there is something more evasive going on here...a covert lesson to be had.

One of our immediate issues is that the key to this passage is left out of the Lectionary reading. This happens a lot in the Lectionary...the editing room floor is full of the rest of the story. In this case, it comes in the few lines right before this section. Notice how the reading today begins with "Now about eight days after these sayings..." which might lead someone just listening to the passage to think "what sayings"? If you were reading you would probably look back and see a section subtitled (in my translation, anyway) *The Nature of Discipleship*. This is a pretty important sounding title, and what Jesus tells his disciples is no less important...and pivotal to the transfiguration story in Luke.

Jesus tells his students that if they want to follow him they must “deny themselves and take up their cross daily”. He goes on to say that “those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will save it.” And if that isn’t enough, he wraps up his lesson on discipleship by asking them, “What does it profit a person to gain the whole world and lose or forfeit themselves?”

Maybe this whole transfiguration episode is a dramatic scene on God’s part...a moment of high holy theatrical display...at any rate, the disciples see a scene they would expect. Here are the great mythical leaders of their faith – Moses and Elijah – talking with Jesus on a level playing field. There would be no more glorious an image for the disciples, who were good Jews themselves, than to have Jesus aligned with Moses and Elijah and then top it off with Jesus bathed in light just as Moses once was according to the scriptures. This transfiguration was the mark of a person particularly close to God.

But here’s my question: when exactly did Peter see Jesus’ glory? Was it at this time, on the mountaintop bathed in light and shining forth with the heroes of the faith surrounding him? I’m pretty sure that’s what Peter thought, after all he was ready to pitch some tents and stay awhile. The great writer and preacher Barbara Brown Taylor turned me on to this thought: I wonder what Peter must have thought about glory later on...for the next time he gazed upon Jesus’ face it was embracing a leprous beggar and the next time it was tending to a desperate crowd begging him for healing? What did he think about glory when he saw the face of his teacher beaten and bloodied awaiting his death by execution?

What exactly are we to think about this whole glory thing? Luke spells it out for us in this conversation on the mountain. The text says that Elijah and Moses are speaking to him of his *departure*...the word though is *exodus*. They aren’t talking to him about his death or his sacrifice, but what he has yet to accomplish. They are talking about a journey he will take...one that will free captives. Jesus, at least to the heroes of the faith, has something to do. He’s not some pawn fulfilling a cosmic balancing act, but a teacher here to free us from the slavery of sin and death...to rid us of the model of a divine shell game that rewards some and eternally punishes others.

So on this generic mountaintop we see the light and the expected accessories of glory, but it isn’t Jesus who wants to stay there, it is Peter - and Luke is sure to tell us he doesn’t know what he is saying. Because I think Luke tries to show us that staying up there isn’t the point. It is a nice distraction for a moment...a recharge of the spiritual engines...but the work of God is down the mountain. Luke gives us this perplexing question – where is the glory? Is it in this magnificent light or is it down the mountain among the sick and rejected? Is it found in Jesus taking his place among the legendary figures of faith or is it Jesus headed to the cross; reminding us that even at our deepest moments of doubt and sadness God is present?

The glory part is that we are symbolically freed from needing to be imprisoned by our own inadequacies or shortcomings. We are freed from feeling like our lives are finite, useless things. We are freed to truly live without focusing our entire life to staving off death.

The down the mountain part is that we are called to have more than just spiritual freedom. We are sent to live that spiritual freedom out by creating physical freedom – freedom from slavery of the more awful and standard kind, freedom from abuse, freedom from poverty and despair, freedom from oppression and hopelessness, freedom from rejection and alienation.

See, here's the catch...the same one that caught Peter. His model isn't the light. It isn't held on the mountain...so building a dwelling up there wouldn't help you. It's what happens when he comes *down* from the mountain. I feel like I'm taking you on a brief tour of the Bible this morning but this sentiment can be best expressed by reading what most scholars think was a hymn in the early church. It comes inserted into one of Paul's letters – as if Paul is quoting a hymn to make his point. It comes from Philippians, chapter 2, verses 5-11

READ PHILIPPIANS 2:5-11

Glory, it would seem, means something else entirely in God's reign. It isn't held on the mountain, it is found in the darkness that scared the disciples and scares us still. It is found by going down the mountain. This is why I think Jesus is so frustrated at the end of the passage. Having been given a bold and dramatic example of who Jesus is and what he stands for, the disciples still don't get it. I can only think that Jesus would be as frustrated today. Instead of a call to selfless service, we have made his sole call to be individual salvation – eternal life for a single person at a time. Instead of transformation of our lives to a more loving and compassionate path, we have made the message of Jesus about saying the right things and getting into the club.

If you want to know about Jesus' glory, look at the last part of this passage. Jesus heals the boy of a demon that abuses and tortures him. The demon tells this young one he is worthless and beats him up inside. The disciples don't know what to say, they are scared to act because they might be breaking a theological taboo.

Here's what I imagine. As this boy full of self-loathing and anger comes in front of Jesus, the very embodiment of God as the church will come to call him, Jesus simply leans down and whispers this...God loves you. No matter what someone else has told you, God loves you...just as you are.

That's what casts the demon out. Not magic or fantastic exorcism, but the remarkable power of unconditional love. As bright as Jesus' face was on the mountaintop, I imagine an even brighter glow there amidst the struggle and suffering...because that's where I think you find his glory. If you're looking for evidence of Jesus' proximity to God, don't look to the mountaintop - look here on the flat ground in front of this afflicted young boy who no one else would help.

We all want to stay on the mountaintop where the sun is shining and everybody glows in the presence of the most high. We want the glory but not the work. We want our puppies to be perfect from day one - no trouble at all. We want our kids to be well-mannered and polite without doing the same thing ourselves. We want good roads and schools but low taxes. We want to feed the world without missing a meal. We want to have peace but only on our own

terms. We want to be forgiving and loving until it becomes hard to do so. We're not up on that mountain bathed in the light...we're down here where we don't readily see God in the darkness and don't hear often enough that the light shines in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it.

One of the many things I love about this church is that our glory isn't found in grand spectacle or flashing lights. Our glory isn't boasted by numbers or dressed in robes...it is in the classrooms on Sunday mornings tending to children who aren't ours by blood but are ours by choice...it is in the warehouse on Virginia Avenue downtown on Saturdays feeding people without judgment or condition...it is on the streets of a mountain town in Nicaragua where deaf children have new options and new hope.

Don't be afraid of the work. It's hard to show up for early meetings on one of the boards...it's hard to take every Saturday morning to cook meals for people who are shut-in...it's hard to make the time for mentoring students or visiting people in the hospital or for choir practice every week. Doing the relentless work of a life of faith doesn't come easy. Building a community takes effort, strength, fortitude and a willingness to invest yourself in something. That kind of commitment can be a challenging, daunting and even scary proposal...especially when there is so little blazing, glorious light to be seen. It can be so tempting to just come together, laugh a bit and pat ourselves on the back, relishing in our comfort.

I think of how the disciples chose to leave every comfort they knew in their pretty uncomfortable existence. They chose to leave family and home because they encountered something in this teacher from Nazareth that compelled them...they saw something in his way of grace and love that made them believe that a different world was possible. They saw the glory of that miraculous way of being peace in the world. They saw his glory - it just wasn't until much later that they realized it wasn't on the mountaintop that they saw it.

See, they were as trapped as any of us in the deceptive web of glory. They were unable or unwilling to heal the boy because of the same afflictions we have. They thought glory only came in bright, blazing packages...and worse than this, they thought glory was the point. Caught up in talking about the glorious nature of Jesus they forgot to be like Jesus and care for those right in front of them.

That is the lesson of the Transfiguration. If we expect being like Jesus to be glorious light and radiant meetings with legendary figures then we have missed the boat. Our model is the one that this hymn quoted by Paul tells us about - the God enfleshed who has all the power in the world and chooses to empty himself...the one so closely aligned with divinity that he could simply live up there on the mountain. But this Jesus is here, down here in the chaotic, amazing, awful world in which we live. This Jesus is the messenger of the God who His witness to us is that any salvation we might have won't be found in saying the right phrases or being properly moistened...it will be found in our reaching out to those left behind and whispering to them...God loves you...just as you are.

AMEN



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