

Reflections of Glory

from the pulpit of
Bryn Mawr Presbyterian Church
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by
the Reverend Agnes W. Norfleet

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Transfiguration of the Lord

Exodus 34:29-35

²⁹Moses came down from Mount Sinai. As he came down from the mountain with the two tablets of the covenant in his hand, Moses did not know that the skin of his face shone because he had been talking with God. ³⁰When Aaron and all the Israelites saw Moses, the skin of his face was shining, and they were afraid to come near him. ³¹But Moses called to them; and Aaron and all the leaders of the congregation returned to him, and Moses spoke with them. ³²Afterward all the Israelites came near, and he gave them in commandment all that the LORD had spoken with him on Mount Sinai.

³³When Moses had finished speaking with them, he put a veil on his face; ³⁴but whenever Moses went in before the LORD to speak with him, he would take the veil off, until he came out; and when he came out, and told the Israelites what he had been commanded, ³⁵the Israelites would see the face of Moses, that the skin of his face was shining; and Moses would put the veil on his face again, until he went in to speak with him.

Luke 9:28-36

²⁸Now about eight days after these sayings Jesus took with him Peter and John and James, and went up on the mountain to pray. ²⁹And while he was praying, the appearance of his face changed, and his clothes became dazzling white. ³⁰Suddenly they saw two men, Moses and Elijah, talking to him. ³¹They appeared in glory and were speaking of his departure, which he was about to accomplish at Jerusalem. ³²Now Peter and his companions were weighed down with sleep; but since they had stayed awake, they saw his glory and the two men who stood with him. ³³Just 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. ³⁴While he was saying this, a cloud came and overshadowed them; and they were terrified as they entered the cloud. ³⁵Then from the cloud came a voice that said, “This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!” ³⁶When the voice had spoken, Jesus was found alone. And they kept silent and in those days told no one any of the things they had seen.

I was on the campus of Princeton Seminary to preach for one of their weekday worship services about a month ago. This week a story about that Princeton chapel came to mind when I thought about these two passages of scripture recounting the Transfiguration of Moses, then Jesus.

Miller Chapel is a jewel of a little Greek Revival building, built in 1834, with a colonnade of Doric Columns across the front. Clear glass windows fill the lovely and simple worship space with warmth and light. The chapel used to sit at the end of the campus facing Mercer Street but in the mid-1930's they moved the chapel into the center of the seminary, facing the quadrangle. The story is that on the day Miller Chapel was moved, half the town turned out to watch the operation. Among them was Albert Einstein who lived two doors down from the seminary campus, and stories are legion about his comings and goings. Einstein is said to have watched the snug little chapel as it lumbered down the street on the mover's rig and quipped something to the effect of, "I sure hope they don't think they can fit God into that little box."

Lest anyone ever think that we can fit God into some four walls of any worship experience or our imaginations, or even into our well-crafted theologies, need no more than today's mountain top experiences to prove us wrong. Something happened to Moses up on Mount Sinai when he was in the presence of God. He not only came down with the Ten Commandments tucked under his arm; he came down with his face shining like the sun. I imagine the people at the foot of the mountain did not even notice the stone tablets he carried; so amazed were they by the appearance of his face. I love this little line in the story: "Moses did not know that the skin of his face shone because he had been talking with God." That may be the most riveting understatement in all of the Torah!

Moses again mysteriously shows up when a very similar thing happens to Jesus. Jesus' face changed too; his clothes dazzled; Moses, representing the law, is on one side of him; and Elijah, the stand-in for all the prophets on the other. They appeared – the three of them together, the text says, in glory.

What is God's glory – that is depicted so vividly on Mount Sinai with Moses, and in this Transfiguration of Jesus? What is God's glory, which is central to our understanding of Jesus Christ? In the Old Testament, the glory of God represented God's own presence among Israel – whether in the cloud with Moses in Exodus, or in the tent of meeting in the wilderness as in Numbers, or when God filled the Temple with divine glory in First Kings. In the New Testament, as Son of God, Jesus embodies God's presence, not just among the people of God, but also in the world. In John's gospel, God's divine glory is revealed in him as “the Word made flesh, full of grace and truth.” In Hebrews, Jesus is depicted as the “radiance of God's glory and the exact imprint of God's being.” “Glory is the outward manifestation of God, just as holiness is the inward,” wrote Frederick Buechner. “To behold God's glory is the closest you can get to God this side of Heaven... Glory is what God looks like when, for the time being, all you have to look at God with is a pair of eyes.”¹

Those who do see God with their eyes in the Bible are often on a mountaintop, a place in the history of human yearning where God has been found. The Celtic Christians would much later describe this kind of place of revelation a Thin Place, where for a moment the veil between heaven and earth is lifted, and something of the mystery and majesty of God seeps into the human experience in a transcendent and yet, unmistakable way. In the case of Peter, James and John, on that Mount of Transfiguration, all the presence of God that had been with Moses and later Elijah during their day is now seen shining in the face of Jesus. Jesus is changed into a being of light. It is as if what had been inside him all along shone through for others to see.

Now, the gospel of Luke does not leave the interpretation of this visual wonder up to us to interpret all on our own. Luke, alone among the gospel writers, records the conversation between Moses and Elijah and Jesus. They talk of Jesus' impending “departure” for Jerusalem, the cross and the death that await him there. And the word for “departure” here is *exodus*. With Moses there beside him, the connection is unmistakable.

¹ Frederick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking*.

Jesus will accomplish a second exodus, leading his people safely through the deep waters of death into resurrection. Just as Moses before him led the enslaved Israelites out of Egypt as on dry ground through the parted sea, so Jesus is leading his people safely – through the depths, through the valley, through the shadows, through the agony, through the pain, and through the grief of death – into the brightness of God’s eternal glory. Sometimes, those of us who hear these ancient stories of Transfiguration, and trust in the presence of God revealed through them, will find reflections of that glory shining in the faces of those around us.

Anthony Robinson is a United Church of Christ minister and biblical scholar. A couple of years ago, he wrote of the time he spent with his sister, Regan, as she died. Diagnosed with metastatic cancer in mid-July, she passed away forty days later in late August. He described that time as a Lent lodged in summer. Tony Robinson had retired only two weeks before his sister called with the shattering news. He drove to her home on the Puget Sound and, with her son, became a primary caregiver for the time she had left.

Regan decided not to have any medical treatment, and instead to live to the fullest the time she had left. She used the time well, first attending to practical matters like her will, settling funeral arrangements, and lining up a hospice team. In the evenings, for as long as she felt well, they had parties; friends came for dinner, they sat out on the deck looking at the tidal estuary, watching the endless variety of birds that came and went. They told stories, read poetry, listened to ball games on the radio and hugged a lot.

Regan did not have significant pain until the last two weeks, so there was blessed time to write notes to friends, take things she would no longer need to the thrift store and pay attention to the life around her. There was time to talk about their childhood together and the paths each had taken in their adult lives. In the last days, Tony and his nephew were joined by Regan’s best friend, Rhoda. They took turns sitting with her and caring for her. For her part, Regan let them care for her and share as much of the journey as they could.

Tony Robinson concluded, writing this: “During her last 40 days my sister had what I can only call a brightness. She had always had a radiant smile. It did not leave her. A handsome woman, she seemed to grow more so as those days passed. But the light of those days was not only hers. It was as if the whole time, the whole journey, were made in some light. ...There was a richness to her dying, a revelation in death. We too had been to some mountaintop, and our own faces shone from the journey.”²

Sometimes we can't see how experiences with God have shaped us, but others know. They see it reflected in our faces. They see the look in our eyes when we suddenly recognize that following Jesus means living more deeply in the world, not less. They see it – when we trust God's glory – is revealed in this man who welcomed the sinner and outsider, touched the sick, and fed the poor. Something of God is reflected in us when we get it – that the Christian faith is not so much a list of do's and don'ts – do this and don't do that – as it is God's great “yes” to life, this gritty, earthly, often painful, messy life on earth, and the eternal life to come.

We can see God's glory reflected in people who live more intentionally, more passionately, exposing ourselves to more love, more pain, more suffering, more tears, more joy. We can see God's glory when one's life opens up to another in need, to a stranger at the door of forsakenness, to a neighbor who longs for sacred companionship, to the evidence of God pulling us out of our own little worlds. We see it when we respond to the call of Christ upon our hearts; something lights up in our faces.

Whatever else may have happened up on that mountaintop, whatever it was that caused Jesus to shine like the sun – sometimes gets reflected in our faces, in the faces of those we love, in the faces of those remarkable bearers of light we see spread out across the globe.

² Kim Clayton, “God's Beloved: Accompanied by Glory,” Montreat Worship and Music Conference, 2015, makes note of the translation of “departure” as “exodus,” and also quotes Anthony B. Robinson, from “Luminous at the end,” in *The Christian Century*, June 10, 2015, 30-33.

God is not content to be housed – in a chapel, in a sanctuary, in a set of theological precepts, in our often dim-witted intellect, or even in our best social justice instincts and actions. God is not fully contained – even – in the Bible, our holy script.

God descends into our world – in glory, as brightness in the darkest of days; as the Psalmist describes it – *as a lamp to our feet and a light to our path*³ which now and again is reflected in our faces.

AMEN.

³ Psalm 119:105