

The Glory of the Self-Giving God

Exodus 34:29-35

Luke 9:28-36

“They appeared in glory and were speaking of his departure [exodus], which he was about to accomplish at Jerusalem.”

We began this season in the ophthalmologist’s office, our chin in the stirrup, God the ophthalmologist fitting our eyes to see God’s glory shining in the world. Each week, you and I tried on the stories in Luke’s Gospel as if they were corrective lenses, God asking us if we could see the light of God’s glory better with this story or the next. In order to see God’s glory, of course, we needed both/and in this inglorious world because to see God’s glory is to see “the paradoxical opposite of all human glory: light revealed in darkness, triumph through defeat, greatness expressed in lowliness, freedom experienced in obedience, life through death. Jesus entered the way of suffering,” Donald Luther writes, “and exactly in that way he entered, expressed, [and] revealed the heart, the glory of the self-giving God.” It is through the eyes of those who first saw and believed God was in Christ that we see and believe two thousand years later.

Though let me offer an aside on this last Sunday after Epiphany and before we do business with the Transfiguration. Given that we live in a “spiritual but not religious” age, many people report that their *naked* eyes are perfectly capable of seeing the ineffable presence that is more than meets the eye in the world. Some even report an encounter with God’s presence directly while others report feeling a spirit of some sort mediated through the vastness of the universe or through the peace of their own inner being. For those who deem the naked eye to be sufficient, there is no need to focus their seeing through the stories of Scripture; no need for a community to guide them or be by their side in the darkest hour; no need for the saints who have gone before them, teaching them to discern between light and darkness, between truth and the lie. This is the spiritual quest of the singular pilgrim, the religious reportage of the rugged individual. Though I hasten to add that I *get* why people are choosing to be “spiritual and not religious” given what religion has done and did again this week to wound God’s heart of love precisely by religion’s use of Scripture to condemn LGBTQ Christians, as well as their advocates, and the church’s use of its collective power to exclude the exception, and the preacher’s use of ordination to humiliate rather than, in humility, to serve the other.

Moreover, I certainly get how those of us here, including those of us whose theological glasses are as thick as coke bottle bottoms, how we mistake the darkness for the light and learn to love it fiercely in spite of our being guided by Scripture and community and tradition. Luke got that too. So in the middle of his orderly account to Theophilus of the events handed down to him from those who “in the beginning were eyewitnesses and servants of the word,” and just before Jesus takes Peter and John and James up the mountain, Luke mercifully wants us and the early church to know that the seeing of these eyewitnesses was as partial and blurred as our own. Face to face with Jesus, some saw a prophet; others a teacher; more and more religious leaders saw a blasphemer. Even John, who baptized Jesus, asks in Luke’s seventh chapter, “Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?” The disciples ask in the eighth, “Who, then, is this, that he commands even the winds and the water and they obey him?” Curiously the ones who see the light of God in Jesus most clearly are, on the one hand, the demons, crying out, “What have you to do with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God?” and, on the other hand, the sick, the lame, the lepers, the outcasts, in sum, the most vulnerable made whole by his touch.

All of this is why, on the last Sunday after Epiphany, I find myself imagining again God the ophthalmologist, who is presently pointing to an eye chart twenty feet way. God asks Luke’s characters to say what they see when they see Jesus. Herod reports what others have seen: John raised from the dead, Elijah reappearing, one of the ancient prophets arisen. To his credit, Herod sticks with the facts and says, “John I beheaded; but who is this about whom I hear such things?” And he tried to see him,” Luke adds, giving Herod the benefit of the doubt. Then it is the disciples’ turn. “Who do the crowds say that I am?” Jesus asks. The disciples say what Herod said. Then Jesus asks those closest to him who they see when they see his face. Peter answers, “The Messiah of God.”

True, but here's the rub: because to see God's glory is to see "the paradoxical opposite of all human glory," like Peter, when we confess our faith, we may have the words right but do not know where to go in the text for their meaning. To wit: five literal verses on homosexuality or Scripture interpreting Scripture through the glory of the self-giving God? "The whole world pours at us," Robert Penn Warren once wrote. "But the code book somehow is lost." The Messiah of God Peter saw in Jesus sent him to those places in the code book where a glorified Davidic king was promised. Luke began his Gospel there as well. "He will be great," Gabriel said to Mary, "and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David and he will rule over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end."

But in the middle of Luke's Gospel, in the chapter at whose end Jesus will set his face toward Jerusalem, toward his departure, his exodus, his death, Jesus points Peter to a different text, a text about the paradoxical opposite of all human glory, saying, "The Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, chief priests, and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised." In other words, if you want to see God's glory, you need to look for light revealed in darkness, triumph through defeat, greatness expressed in lowliness, freedom experienced in obedience, life through death. This is not the text Peter had in mind.

Noting that the disciples could only read the first few letters on the top of the eye chart—the big ones, the ones you can see at a glance without putting on the lens of the stories in Scripture, the letters you can see in the world if you just look with your naked eye, God the ophthalmologist knew the time had come to examine the disciples' retinas, to inspect that "layer at the back of the eye that is sensitive to light and triggers nerve impulses that pass via the optic nerve to the brain, where a visual image is formed." So Jesus invited them up the mountain, the place on earth believed to be closest to the light that God is. It must have been night, darkness being necessary if you really want to see the light. As in Gethsemane, the disciples were half asleep according only to Luke. Also according to Luke alone, Jesus is praying on the mountain, is speaking with God face to face, as one speaks with a friend, when the appearance of his face changed and his clothes became dazzling white. If you have not lost the code book, Moses will come to mind!

The disciples open their eyes and find themselves in the ophthalmologist's darkened office on the top of the mountain after the drops have taken effect. Now the pupil--which determines how much light is let into the eye--is not in their control but God's. God the ophthalmologist shines the light of God's glory in the face of Jesus Christ directly into their eyes. With their pupils opened wide, the light causes tears to roll down their faces as they see God's glory shining through this man of sorrow. It was as though, for one bright shining moment, all the intimations of light glimpsed over the past three years were concentrated in a light so bright you would think that their seeing would never again be the same.

Luke apparently thinks otherwise, thinks the visual image formed by the disciples on their retinas of a glorious and conquering king was instead *magnified* by Jesus' transfiguration. Therefore Luke alone includes the conversation Jesus has with Moses and Elijah concerning his departure, his exodus, his suffering, his death. Still their eyes are fixed only on Jesus' glory until a cloud overshadows them and terrifies them. Think Moses. The Israelites. Sinai. When the disciples can see nothing, a voice says: "This is my Son, my Chosen. *Listen* to him." The cloud lifts. The glory departs. Jesus is alone. The disciples are speechless. End of story. Beginning of Lent. For in an instant, the voice has turned us from a season of looking to a season of listening, from a season of seeing to a season of hearing, from a season in which the eye is the organ given us by God to receive the light of the glory of God in the face to Jesus Christ, to a season when the ear, the organ that first received the announcement of Christ's birth, will be the organ to receive the news of his death and resurrection.

For the next forty days, you and I will listen to him, follow him, deny him, betray him, forsake him as this man of sorrows makes his way to the cross, holding in our minds the memory of the blinding glory glimpsed on the mountain but not seeing again until he carries with us and takes bread and blesses it and breaks it and gives it to us. Gives himself to us. Then will our eyes be opened to see the paradoxical glory of the self-giving God: light revealed in darkness, triumph accomplished through defeat, greatness expressed in lowliness, freedom experienced in obedience, life redeemed through death. Amen.