

Introduction to Scripture

We begin a sermon series this morning on the cusp of Lent. Each Sunday, Brian or Austin or I will be inviting you to look through the eyes of various characters in Scripture--the eyes of the devil, of Nicodemus, of the woman at the well, of the blind man, of Mary and Martha, of Caiaphas and Pilate, and of the disciples—in order better to see Jesus. Then on Easter morning, accompanied by Mary Magdalene, we will come to the tomb seeking the risen Christ through our own eyes of faith. Today, however, I am inviting you to see the unseeable: to see Jesus through the eyes of God. This is impossible, of course, and yet I think this is what Jesus' transfiguration invited Peter and James and John to do and what Matthew's story of the transfiguration invites us to do. So listen for God's address in Matthew's 17th chapter...

Through the Eyes of God

Exodus 24:12-18

Matthew 17:1-13

“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!’

Primitive cosmology once held that if ever human beings were to brush shoulders with God's presence on earth, to catch a glimpse of God's hind parts, the place of meeting could only be on the top of a high mountain, the place on earth raised by God to reach toward the heavens. Cathedrals proclaim as much with their vaulted ceilings and flying buttresses. So too our everyday speech presumes this three-storied universe of Scripture with heaven above and hades below.

Yet as we are more taken with black holes in a distant galaxy or read even this week of another solar system not so far away and likely populated with even more aliens to dread (as if we had not manufactured enough on this planet), these high places in Scripture have been bested, the heavens emptied of God's real presence. Facts astonish us now rather than the holy, holy, holy God, though even facts are losing their luster. In these latter days of death's apparent dominion over the eternity of love for which we were made, we decline the invitation to “get thee up to a high mountain” in Scripture at the risk of never meeting the God through whose eyes we were meant to see and in whose mysterious presence we were meant to rejoice forever.

So with Moses let us first be summoned to the top of Mount Sinai. There a cloud covered the mountain (I imagine thunder and lightning as we heard and saw yesterday!) and God's glory like a devouring fire appeared on the very top of the mountain in the sight of God's people. For forty days and forty nights, God endlessly instructs Moses on the construction of the tabernacle and the consecration of the priests. The people grow weary of waiting even as we grow weary wading through chapter after chapter of religious minutia until finally Moses returns to the people carrying tablets of stone with the law and the commandment chiseled on them.

Fast forward a few millennia, with our awe of God's glory on the mountain long ago forgotten and the light of God's countenance that made Moses' face glow grown dim, we have taken the message on the stone cold tablets to be our major clue about how God sees, about what God is looking for when God casts God's eye upon human beings. God is looking down from heaven, we imagine if we imagine God at all, to see how we are living in relation to him and our impossible neighbors. On this mountain, we say, God communicated truth (which we have translated into a system of correct propositions to be believed) and goodness (which has become a set of right actions) for which we were made. The lenses through which God sees and orders human life appear to be, at a glance, moral and theological.

Our stern Calvinist forbears confirmed the literal seriousness of the word communicated to Moses on Sinai. (To wit, Brian spent his week pouring over the Larger Catechism and its explication of the commandments for his ordination exams.) From the foot of this first mountain going forward, duty has trumped joy and a dour devotion has overshadowed any gladness we might exhibit as God's children chosen in the second place. Never having dared the Israelites' delight in the law of the Lord, we think God's view of us involves our moral rectitude and our right belief. Our fear is thus not the fear of those bowed down in awe before the living God, but the fear of those bound and determined by our better behavior not to lose that saved place at the top of God's three-storied cosmos.

But the early church fathers and the original reformers are calling us back up the mountain this morning to glimpse God's glory and beauty. What are we even looking for? “Glory is the outward manifestation of [God],” we are reminded by Frederick Buechner, “just as holiness is the inward...Glory is what God looks like when, for the time being, all you have to look at [God] with is a pair of eyes.” As taken as Augustine was with humanity's sin and fall from grace, his prayers could not contain his joy in the presence of God's glory: “Late have I loved Thee, O Beauty so ancient and so new; late have I loved Thee...Thou didst send forth thy beams and shine upon me and chase away my blindness...Thou didst touch me and I have burned for Thy peace,” he prayed in poetic prose.

A millennium or so later, Martin Luther made the case that on Sinai God gave Moses not “prescriptive statements of duties toward God and one’s neighbor in a world that God has created, redeemed and will make new, [but rather] descriptive statements of what happens...in a world that God has made for being human in.” So Luther speaks of the first commandment in terms of what it means to have a God, of the heart and its trusts; the second for Luther reads, “You shall not go about with the name of God as though it made no difference”; in the third he hears God’s command to “make a day of celebration holy.” There is delight running through these admonitions, delight of one who has beheld God’s glory.

Similarly, Calvin speaks of the third use of the law as that which helps guide us toward a life lived in grateful and joyful response to God’s grace revealed in Jesus Christ. “For what would be less lovable,” he writes, “than the law if, with importuning and threatening alone, it troubled souls through fear and distressed them through fright?” Such an understanding of Sinai has readied us to climb the second mountain of the morning, the Mount of Transfiguration, where the light of God’s glory in the face of Jesus Christ cannot be missed, where the law is perfectly fulfilled in the Son’s self-emptying love.

The transfiguration, for one bright shining moment, reveals to human eyes the Father’s complete giving of the light of his glory to the Son a fortnight or so before the Son will yield back to the Father his life on a cross as darkness comes over the whole land. To be transfigured means “to be transformed into something more beautiful or elevated.” “His face shone like the sun,” Matthew reports, “and his clothes became dazzling white.” This is Matthew’s description of what God’s glory looks like when all you have to look at [God] with is a pair of eyes and so leads me to imagine Jesus through the eyes of God. On this mountain, the Father sees his own glory shining completely in the face of the Son. We with the disciples see this too. “We are seeing nothing less than the triune God’s revelation of His eternal life within time,” David Hart says, “and so in the drama [of our redemption] we may discern (within the limits of our created intellects) who God is.” What is also revealed on this mountain is the God who now sees us in the light of the Son’s glory and through the Son’s eyes.

The cell whose light literally brought me to my knees in San Marco Cloisters when I was on sabbatical in Florence was the cell whose fresco proclaimed God’s glory in the blinding white paint that surrounded and almost seemed to emanate from Fra Angelico’s transfigured Christ, a Christ drawn in the form of a cross. Like the disciples who necessarily shaded their eyes at the vision, my head bowed at the brightness of glory brushed across the wall.

Yet more than the light, I was drawn to this cell by the haunting beauty of Fra Angelico’s Christ. It was a beauty which could not be separated from the passion implied in the cruciform, a beauty that necessarily included suffering. As I sat for hours looking at him looking at me, I felt myself being seen by God’s Son through the light of his glory shining on me in that cell. His lenses for seeing were not moral and theological; rather in his gaze he saw me better than I am. “In all this,” Karl Barth says, God’s glory “is a glory that awakens joy, and is itself joyful.” But then surely with Augustine’s prayers in the back of his mind, Barth suggests that the “the element in the idea of glory that we still lack is that of beauty...God’s beauty...[that] embraces death as well as life, fear as well as joy, what we might call the ugly as well as what we might call the beautiful. It reveals itself and wills itself to be known,” he says, “on the road from the one to the other.” What is at stake in our seeing as God sees is “the beauty in his bosom that transfigures you and me.” Put another way, “It is God’s delight in something that makes it beautiful...A beauty grounded in divine acceptance,” theologian David Willis writes. “[A person’s] inherent beauty consists in the fact that [she] is well pleasing to God. It is in God’s seeing that [he] is good.” “This is my Son, the Beloved,” God said on the mountain that day. “With him I am well pleased.”

It has been another week when our common life has been filled with the consequences of our seeing not as God sees but as human fear and hatred see. Another mosque burned, two men from India shot in Kansas because they were seen as alien others, hate crimes against Jews continuing to rise, heightened tensions in response to a racial slur painted on the garage door of an interracial family, transgendered youth returned to a place of insecurity and judgment, families in hiding for fear of being torn asunder. We see one another through eyes blinded by this deathly moment in human history that, for reasons I cannot fathom, is being ordered by people who take delight in the other’s destruction.

But if what happens to Jesus is “in some sense the story of God becoming the God He is, within which story we are also included—for love’s sake,” Robert Jenson supposes, then on the Mount of Transfiguration God becomes the God who sees each created creature not from some fiery distance but close up and through the redeeming love of the Son with whom God is well pleased; through the glory of the beloved who embraced death as well as life, fear as well as joy, the so-called ugly as well as the so-called beautiful, the tragic as well as the comic. This is the God who said, “Let light shine out of darkness,” who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.” Therefore let us more and more become this God’s children, who see each created creature not from some fiery distance, but close up and through the redeeming love of the Son with whom God is well pleased, the Son in whose beauty they no less than we have been transfigured. Thanks be to God!