

## A GLIMPSE OF GLORY

Matthew 17: 1-9

February 6, 2005 SBCC

I bet you couldn't wait until today, could you?

Transfiguration Sunday! One of the biggest days of the Christian Year. Well, at least its big enough so that it shows up every year on the Sunday before Lent. Big enough to appear in relatively similar form in the first three gospels. Big enough that we change our liturgical colors from green to white. Betcha some of you didn't even know what it was. Betcha some of you still don't know what it is.

I have to confess that Transfiguration Sunday is not one of my favorite Sundays either. Perhaps you remember that I told you one of the reasons I liked to preach according to the Common lectionary is that it forces me to deal with texts I would probably leave closed up tight inside the Bible. Well, this is one of them. I don't really relate well to sudden appearances of people who died centuries ago. Nor do I know what to make of a shiny Jesus and voices from the clouds.

Alright, enough whining! Let's get to it and see what we can make of it.

About a week before the story begins, Jesus has asked the disciples THE question. "Who am I?" The disciples hedge by telling Jesus what the rumor mill is saying, but he won't let them get away with that. "Who do you say that I am?" Peter gulps and blurts out what has been forming inside him for some time. "You are the Christ" Then Jesus goes on to warn them that he is not the Messiah they have been led to expect. His way is going to take them into confrontation with the powers that may be and they will kill him. They have trouble hearing that, and they never seem to hear the part that follows – "and be raised on the third day."

Peter takes Jesus aside and argues with him but among the other disciples nobody says, "Wait a minute..." Nobody asks what it all means. It just goes right over their heads. Kind of like those folks today who think that if you believe in God and show up in church reasonably often the world will be rosy and sweet. No problems. All will be well. After all, don't I believe in God?

In the story we've read from Matthew, Jesus takes three of his disciples up to the mountain, probably Mount Hermon in northern Israel. While they were there, Jesus is changed, or transfigured. It is something of a mystery how this happened. The word in the original language means a change from the inside out. Matthew says that Jesus' face shone like the sun. His clothes became dazzling white, so white, that as the Gospel writer Mark tells us, we know something remarkable is going on here: no human can bleach cloth so white. Suddenly, Moses is there, the Old Testament person who brought God's law to the people, and Elijah, the one who represents the prophets who spoke God's word to the people.

However that happened, and whatever happened at this moment on the mountain, it is very clear to the disciples that something holy is going on. They are in the presence of God.

It's clear what this was like for the three disciples: they were so frightened, they did not know what to say. But, Peter, who has an advanced case of foot-in-mouth disease, talks anyway—and offers to build three tents: to make a shrine here, to stay here, in this holy place.

Just then, a cloud covers the disciples. It's the cloud that in the Old Testament is called the glory cloud, the Shekinah cloud, the cloud that was the presence of God. And, the voice of God speaks to the disciples, "This is my Son...listen to him," God's announcement to the disciples, telling them who Jesus is. You see, it's a very holy moment there on the mountain—a time when God is clearly present with the disciples, and they know it and experience the presence of God. They have a vision of God.

You have to look on both sides of this story to see what the transfiguration, this vision, means for the disciples: this story is sandwiched in between two passages where Jesus is just beginning to teach his disciples about his coming death. So, what this holy moment, this being in the presence of God, means for the disciples is that it gives them a vision for life down in the valley. It gives them a vision to keep in front of them as they go through the difficult days ahead when Jesus goes to the cross to die.

The disciples don't understand it very well. As we read the rest of the story, and watch Jesus going toward Jerusalem, being arrested, tried, and nailed on the Cross—and we watch the disciples, Peter denying Jesus and all of them leaving Jesus to go it alone, it often looks as if they forget the vision. But the story is here. They did not forget. As they remember and write the story of Jesus' life, they include this story about being in the presence of God on the mountaintop: It gave them a vision to get through the difficult days ahead. A vision for valley life.

Two of my friends have told me of visions similar to the one the disciples experienced. One friend was in her hotel room in Africa. The other had stopped her car by the side of the highway during a great thunderstorm. Both tell how they saw a great light and how that vision has led them and shaped their lives ever since.

Most of us never have that kind of a vision. We spend much of our lives feeling a bit like the child who summed up his fear of going to school.

“My name is Donald, and I don't know anything. I have new underwear, a loose tooth, and I didn't sleep last night because I'm worried. What if a bell rings and a man yells, 'Where do you belong?' and I don't know? What if the trays in the cafeteria are too tall for me to reach? What if my loose tooth comes out when we have our heads down and are supposed to be quiet? Am I supposed to bleed quietly? What if I splash water on my nametag and my name disappears and no one knows who I am?”<sup>1</sup>

When we feel like Donald, it is the cloud of fear rather than God's glory cloud, which gets our attention.

There are so many things in our lives, which build up into those huge billowing thunderhead clouds that brood over us, day in and day out. Clouds such as loneliness or financial worries, or the gray, murky clouds which surround us as we muddle our way through another case of the flu

and dark, threatening storm clouds as we seek our way through cancer and heart disease and pacemakers and we fear that the only valley ahead of us is the valley of the shadow of death. It is difficult to see through the clouds hanging over our heads, to see any kind of vision to help us find our way through life.

But the promise of the Scripture lesson is that we, too, can have a vision, given to us by God. It will probably happen at some ordinary time. For the disciples, the vision came on an ordinary day, on an ordinary mountain. Maybe you'll be sitting at your desk, working on something, and suddenly, just like that, a little thought will come to you, a tiny seed of an idea—and you know that idea is not your own idea, but the voice of God speaking to you. Maybe you'll be out skiing, or walking, basking in the uncharacteristic warmth we are experiencing, washing the kitchen floor, or in that special chair in your living room in the quiet of the morning—and somehow, you will know that you are especially in the presence of God. No one has to tell you that this moment is holy. You just KNOW that God is with you.

These tiny little glimpses of God's glory become the vision for the living of our lives. The vision God gives will go before us whenever life is tough. That vision helps us to see our way through any clouds, which hover over our heads. With the gap between rich and poor growing, the dollar falling, threats of terrorism, threats to Social Security; with family members and all the dynamics of relationships and communications; with the increased divisiveness in our country, with jobs being outsourced,—life is full of clouds, and life is full of long difficult valleys stretching ahead of us, no matter where we are in our life's journey.

Lent begins on Wednesday, Ash Wednesday. We begin our church observance of Lent with a special service and communion next Sunday. Lent is a time, my friends, to intentionally commit ourselves to seek out the presence of God's glory cloud, to sit under that cloud, to stay there for a while each day to read and reflect, to pray, to listen to see what God will say.

So, place yourself, this week, under the glory cloud of God's presence. Stay there. Let the radiance of Jesus Christ, the son of the living God, shine upon the clouds brooding over your life. Who knows? Some new idea, a tiny seed of an idea, some new thought that is not your thought, but God's thought, God's dream for you, may come to you as you listen. Or, maybe it will just be the sense of the sweetness and comfort of being in the presence of God. Maybe, just enough strength to make it through the day. However it is that you experience God present in your life during the 40 days of the Lenten journey, hold on to it, my friends. Treasure the vision. Ponder it. Hold that vision before you in the days ahead, and all through your life. Let the radiance of God's glory help you to see your way through life, whatever the difficult situations that life brings you. The reason for the vision, my friends, is for life in the valley. Amen

1. Erma Bombeck. Source unknown