

(Mat 17:1-9 NRSV)

<sup>1</sup> Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and his brother John and led them up a high mountain, by themselves. <sup>2</sup> And he was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became dazzling white.

<sup>3</sup> Suddenly there appeared to them Moses and Elijah, talking with him. <sup>4</sup> Then Peter said to Jesus, "Lord, it is good for us to be here; if you wish, I will make three dwellings here, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah." <sup>5</sup> 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!"

<sup>6</sup> When the disciples heard this, they fell to the ground and were overcome by fear.

<sup>7</sup> But Jesus came and touched them, saying, "Get up and do not be afraid." <sup>8</sup> And when they looked up, they saw no one except Jesus himself alone. <sup>9</sup> As they were coming down the mountain, Jesus ordered them, "Tell no one about the vision until after the Son of Man has been raised from the dead."

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## A Glimpse of Glory

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Text: Matthew 17:1-9

When Jesus said, “Suffer the little children to come unto me,” he wanted those who heard him to understand that unless you came to your questions about God as wide-eyed and as willing to believe the unbelievable as a little child, then you would miss God altogether.

Jesus seemed to think that we sometimes get too smart for ourselves, and when we get too smart for ourselves, we start asking the wrong questions and coming up with the wrong answers about God. For example, some of the smartest philosophers in history have spent the best part of two thousand years trying to prove God’s existence. They have devised elaborate arguments and formal proofs. But none of the proofs and arguments hold water. You just can’t make an airtight demonstration of the existence of God.

Frederick Buechner, who in some ways I think is but a grown up child, throws back his head and laughs. He says, of course not, he says, “It is as impossible for [humans] to demonstrate the existence of God as it would be for Sherlock Holmes to demonstrate the existence of Sherlock Holmes.”<sup>1</sup> What an insight Buechner gives us! A child is willing to believe that we are as characters in a story created by God. But we adults, who think sometimes too much of our abilities, seek to reverse the roles and know our maker as if we are God’s author. We witness daily the sorrow that such vanity causes, as convinced followers fall in behind various versions of the God made in the image of human frailties.

Our vanity causes sorrow. Oh yes it does. Our vanity also causes boredom. Socrates used to say that the worst thing a teacher could be was to be boring. Frederick Buechner agrees with him, and accuses us of too often being boring when we talk about God. Buechner says,

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<sup>1</sup>Frederick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking: A Theological ABC*, Harper and Row, 1973, p. 31.

All-wise. All-powerful. All-loving. All-knowing. We bore to death both God and ourselves with such chatter. God cannot be expressed but only experienced.

In the last analysis you cannot pontificate but only point. A Christian is one who points to Christ and says, "I can't prove a thing, but there's something about his eyes and his voice. There's something about the way he carries his head, his hand, the way he carries his cross – the way he carries me."<sup>2</sup>

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God experienced.

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[S]uddenly 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!"

God experienced. On that day, Peter and James and John experienced God. They caught a glimpse of glory. The holy stirred their senses and their awareness. Jesus was transfigured before them. Moses and Elijah appeared to them. One moment they were walking up the mountain with their teacher. It was a perfectly ordinary day. And suddenly, as if they had penetrated a veil, their senses exploded with the presence of God.

In the Biblical narrative this moment is almost as significant as Easter morning itself. Significant for when it occurs. Significant to whom it occurs. And significant in what it actually is.

We are in the middle of Jesus' ministry. And it would be an overstatement to say that things were going well. At best it is a mixed bag. Jesus has healed the sick in Gennesaret; he has walked on water; he has fed the five thousand. But he has also been battled and rejected by the Pharisees and the scribes. His colleague and friend John the Baptist has been murdered. He has taught his disciples many things, but they have proven obtuse. He has told them of his impending death and resurrection, and Peter and the others have wanted no part of that direction. And as the story unfolds from here, James and John reveal that they have been following Jesus for prestige in the hereafter. Judas turns him into the authorities. And Peter, who said that he would follow Jesus to the end of the earth, when the chips are down says that he doesn't even know the man.

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<sup>2</sup>Buchner, 32

In the middle of this muddled mess, in the middle of failure of nerve and failure of comprehension. And to those disciples who have and will continue to demonstrate that they don't really get what Jesus is all about. Right in the middle of this and to James and John and Peter comes a tactile experience of God. Right in the middle of this comes a profound experience of the sacred. An experience of glory.

This electrifying moment is not just a pause in the action. It is not just a respite. Both its occurrence and its magnitude are consequential. When Moses and Elijah and Jesus appeared transfigured to Peter, James and John, the three disciples stood in the presence of the holy. And it was the holy as revealed in the entire narrative of Biblical Israel. Just as Moses took three to the mountain to receive the commandments (Exodus 24:13-14), so Jesus takes three of his disciples to the mountain. Just as there was a six day period in Exodus, our passage begins, "Six days later ..." And just as Moses and Elijah represent Israel's holy history, they appear alongside Jesus in this moment of revelation. These parallels and overlaps make clear the magnitude of the moment. In the middle of the disciples' dullness, in the midst of a ministry which got at best a mixed reception, a glimpse of the most sacred and true was had, a glimpse of glory.

The world that James and John and Peter lived in, the world that Jesus ministered in, that world has changed little in some important ways. Two thousand years of progress has changed the world, to be sure. Advances in science and technology especially have brought to reality inventions and ways of life that were once but fantasy. But for all these changes, truths like those Jesus espoused are still but partially received. Today many of Jesus' followers want to put their own words into his mouth, just as his followers long ago did. Today even the best of us have a hard time living as he wants us to. Today even when we try our hardest, we often fall short. And today we still struggle with life's disappointments, tragedies and horrors. That day on the mountain, that day of Jesus' transfiguration, that day of glimpsing glory came in the midst of life and times such as ours. And that can be nothing but good news for us.

A couple got a telephone call late one night, that telephone call that every parent dreads. It was the hospital. Their daughter was in a serious accident. Life was holding on by a thread. The shock was breathtaking. Hardly had they shaken the cobwebs of sleep and they were asked to grapple with their whole world moving underfoot. As they drove to the hospital, their minds spun with dreaded possibilities. Their hearts ached. Tears flowed down their cheeks. And then, in the midst of this terrifying and nightmarish moment, there came without warning feelings of peace and calm and well-being. Suddenly they felt as though no matter what they found when they got to the hospital, in some unexplainable sense it

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would not matter. Somehow, for at least a moment they had access to the greater scheme of things, access to the mind of God, a glimpse of glory.

Like the disciples on the mountain, one moment this startling reality shone before the couple, and in the next it had vanished. The dread and fear returned. Their knees were weak as they entered the emergency room doors to hear the news. Things were still unclear. Life and death were yet undecided. Even if their daughter survived the effect of the injuries was unknown. They sat that night holding each other very much in the middle of the mess that was their lives.

And yet over the next weeks and months they would say time and again that the glimpse of glory that they were permitted on the way to the hospital, that moment when they sensed peace and well-being in perhaps the most agonizing hour of their lives, they would say time and again that that moment somehow never fully left them. Even through the ups and downs of the days that followed, even when they could not feel it, they somehow understood that that glory which they had glimpsed was the truest reality of all. It gave them hope. It pointed their direction. It strengthened them.

After Jesus was transfigured before them Peter, James and John would continue to bungle the project. They would continue to ask Jesus for the wrong things. They would fail to comprehend what he was saying to them. And they would flee when the chips were down. Even after his resurrection, some of them doubted. But that glimpse of glory they caught never quite left them. At the end of the Gospel, Jesus tells his disciples, "Remember, I am with you always." And that they knew, for their experience on the mountain remained imprinted upon them. And it allowed them finally to overcome their fears and doubts, to establish the movement that would become the Christian church. It allowed them finally to carry on the work of Jesus.

I could tell you a hundred stories about glimpsing glory. I could tell you about the man whose family and job were falling apart who all of a sudden felt that moment of well-being and peace. There was still plenty of mess to go through, plenty of dark days and insufferable nights left. But the assurance and the perspective of that moment never left him.

I could tell you of my friend the Anglican Bishop of Belfast for the last twenty-five years. He has witnessed a struggle which has seemed intractable. He has seen families wracked by death and by hatred. He has officiated memorial services for more young adults and children than any man ought to. But he has also glimpsed glory. And when you ask him, you find that he is a man full of hope. He believes that in the end people will understand that violence and hatred are not the way. And even in the mess that continues to surround him and his people, even as the tears fill his eyes, he believes he is witness to a new day. He has had a glimpse of glory.

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Buechner was right. There is nothing to be proved here, only to be experienced. For catching a glimpse of glory is more real and convincing than any belief or proof or doctrine.

We are about to enter the season of Lent. It is a season of reflection and a season in which we grapple with the underbelly of our existence, a season when we follow our own complicity in the path Jesus walked. But Lent is six days a week. It doesn't include the Sundays in Lent. And the reason for that is that even as we journey through the valley of the shadow of death, we have the glimpse of glory to guide us and sustain us. It is meant to guide us and sustain us through Lent. It is meant to guide us and sustain us through the heartaches and sorrows that each of us endure in this life of ours. It is meant to guide us and sustain us as we stumble and bumble our way to the way Jesus has called us. And it is meant to guide us and sustain us even as we seek glory itself, seek to be a people of peace living in a world of peace.

It may take a child's mind to believe in the possibility. But a child's mind comes to an adult in a flash, in a moment on a mountain when glory is glimpsed. Amen.

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