

## Glory Untamed

A sermon preached by the Rev. Canon Joanna C. Leiserson at Christ Church Cathedral, Cincinnati, Ohio, on Sunday, February 22, 2009.

Elijah ascends into heaven in a whirlwind, and God reveals himself in glory. Jesus becomes bathed in light and transfigured before his disciples, and God reveals himself in glory in Christ. The psalmist sees his holy city Zion, bathed in a consuming flame and a raging storm and proclaims, “God reveals himself in glory.” Paul looks at the gospel and sees the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. How does God reveal himself in glory to us? Do we look around and see ourselves surrounded, or enwrapped, by God’s glory? Do we even know what it is?

In biblical times, God’s glory is often represented in spectacular showings of nature—on Mount Sinai, a fiery, smoking volcano; in a whirlwind going up towards heaven “up there;” and famously, at the top of a mountain with its fresh, clean air and the sound of sheer silence. This is where we get the mystical and ecstatic “mountaintop experience,” which, by the way, is not lightness and comfort and joy but often awe and terror at its power before us: “The chariots of Israel and its horsemen!” as Elisha shouted, cannot have been a cozy and peaceful sight. Are you ready for it? The glory of God is not just splendor and magnificence but also a clear knowledge of the power and absoluteness of God that is, frankly, quite frightening when we face it in our human frailty. We have no need of whirlwinds in our lives. Perhaps we know, deep in our psyches, that we cannot see the face of God and live. In ancient times, people held the glory of God to be so sacred and so powerful that they corralled it in a box—the Ark of the Covenant—not so much to control it as to keep it from killing them by its nearness.

Like the ancients, we are able to some extent to contain the power of God’s glory so that it does not overwhelm us. We contain that power not by putting God’s glory in a box but by putting our wonder in a box. We are no longer so susceptible to being awed. When we were children, the whole world was new and full of wonder. As we got older, we learned to tame that wonder. Our modern scientific knowledge has tamed it even more, as has our technological abilities to control nature. When we look up at the stars, we know what they are made of and what powers them, and we can even track their life cycle. We understand the workings of nature—we can even monitor the whirlwind that took Elijah—so that the natural world no longer mystifies us. With our knowledge, we have controlled our ability to wonder at the glory of God around us. We have tamed God’s glory. We have flattened the mountaintop.

But perhaps we have gone overboard. The image of Jesus transfigured before his disciples tells us that God’s glory will not stay hidden. God cannot be tamed, or contained, or subdued, or confined. God’s power will not be denied. Someone once said that the quality of life is measured not so much by the number of breaths we take, but by the number of times our breath is taken away. When we live our days without ever having an experience that takes our breath away, we are living in a shadow of what God

intends for us. In the gospel narrative today, Jesus was not changed. The Transfiguration is not about Jesus changed into something he was not, as if he suddenly “turned into” the Son of God. It is the disciples who with their newly opened eyes, finally see him as he truly is, was, and always will be—fully human and fully God. In a way, it is not Jesus who is transfigured, but they who are transformed.

We don’t know what opens their eyes to suddenly see with such clarity the glory of God in Jesus. Perhaps Jesus knew that they needed to climb a high mountain to get away from the distractions of daily life, so that they could be quiet, just for a while. In our day, the noises of commuter traffic and high technology, commercial breaks, elevator music too often muffles the voice of God that may call to us. We are anxious about our job and our retirement. We are surrounded by a culture of consumption and a craving for things that drown us in debt and fill us with emptiness. We are a society on cultural steroids. But the more we ramp up the noise, the more spiritually numb we become. Can we recognize the times when God is saying to us, “Look in front of you. This is the Son of God. Listen to him!”

But perhaps I am preaching to the choir. Here we are in church. Is this not a place where we come to hear God and to proclaim the glory of God? Or have we somehow tamed the glory of God by sequestering it in a building, as Peter in his terror wanted to do with his idea of tents? The church is indeed a place where we intentionally open ourselves to let God be revealed in us. But in being so comfortable and familiar with our rituals, we are too often shielded from the dangerous power of God’s glory. When we sing or say every Sunday, “Glory to God in the highest,” or “Heaven and earth are full of your glory,” do we know what we mean? Do we experience that glory? Or have we recited it to meaninglessness? Even for us who are professional worshippers, as it were, it is too easy to let the familiar routines of day-to-day tasks take away the space to encounter God in his glory, when we leave God out of our day-to-day.

How can we have a mountaintop experience when we have flattened the mountains? The surprise and the good news is, we don’t need to go find a mountaintop in order to experience God’s glory. Remember that after the Transfiguration event, Jesus comes down from the mountain and back into the towns to offer healing and forgiveness and table fellowship. We don’t have to go to a mountaintop. God has come down from the mountain to be with us. Don’t look for God in the spectacular. Look for God in the ordinary. It is not the spectacular acts that smoke mountains and bring chariots of fire—it is not these acts that reveal God’s glory as much as the everyday acts of forgiving someone, or offering a plate of food, or listening to a lonely person, that reveal God’s glory. It is these everyday acts that, when we do them every day, are the stones by which we build a mountain, stone by stone, to become the way for others to reach the mountaintop. This is how WE are transfigured, to be the persons God created us to be—the likeness of Christ as we are changed from glory to glory, and as we bear the hope of the world to others everyday act by everyday act, and as we build up the mountain of God and reveal the glory of God one stone at a time.