“There’s no rational explanation for Glory”

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Exodus 24:12-18; Matthew 17:1-9

***Exodus 24:12-18***

***12The Lord said to Moses, “Come up to me on the mountain and wait there; I will give you the tablets of stone, with the law and the commandment, which I have written for their instruction.” 13So Moses set out with his assistant Joshua, and Moses went up onto the mountain of God. 14To the elders he had said, “Wait here for us, until we come back to you. Look, Aaron and Hur are with you; whoever has a dispute may go to them.”***

***15Then Moses went up on the mountain, and the cloud covered the mountain. 16The glory of the Lord settled on Mount Sinai, and the cloud covered it for six days; on the seventh day he called to Moses out of the cloud. 17Now the appearance of the glory of the Lord was like a devouring fire on the top of the mountain in the sight of the Israelites. 18Moses entered the cloud and went up on the mountain. Moses was on the mountain for forty days and forty nights.***

***Matthew 17:1-9***

***17 Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and his brother John and led them up a high mountain, by themselves. 2And he was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became bright as light. 3Suddenly there appeared to them Moses and Elijah, talking with him. 4Then Peter said to Jesus, “Lord, it is good for us to be here; if you wish, I will set up three tents here, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.” 5While he was still speaking, suddenly a bright cloud overshadowed them, and a voice from the cloud said, “This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!” 6When the disciples heard this, they fell to the ground and were overcome by fear. 7But Jesus came and touched them, saying, “Get up and do not be afraid.” 8And when they raised their eyes, they saw no one except Jesus himself alone.***

As a lover of words, I just have to share with you, my favorite word from my sermon study this week. “Retrojected.” When ascribing meaning to the transfiguration scene in the gospel of Matthew, one commentator suggested that the mountain top scene was really a description of a post-resurrection sighting of Jesus, that had been retrojected into the earlier chapters of the gospel. Retrojected.

The transfiguration scene, which appears in all four gospels, is one of those Bible stories that seems fantastical enough that it causes trouble for the readers. In our modern world we have become used to being able to explain things. We know more about science, about human behavior, about physics, etc. We have come to the point when we witness something spectacular we assume a logical, less-than-spectacular reason for it. We are too sensible for spectacle. We decide immediately that scenes like the transfiguration are not objective reports from an actual event. The transfiguration scene, with Jesus’ shining face, dazzling clothing, and a voice from a cloud readily lends itself to guesses about what *else* it could possibly be. Some have said that this scene is just a subjective vision, or a dream, a misunderstanding of a natural event, or a purely symbolic story created to match other Hellenistic traditional apocalyptic epiphanies. It is in this context that the commentator described a theory that said, “…the transfiguration is a mis-placed resurrection story…in which the glory of the exalted one of Christian faith is retrojected into the pre-Easter narrative.”1

I feel smart just saying that word. And yet, following an intellectual path into today’s scripture is not completely satisfying. Sometimes, there just isn’t a rational explanation for Glory. We have learned in the past weeks through other scripture, that Matthew’s teaching perspective is that Jesus is the fulfillment of ancient prophecy. Every text we have read in the past few weeks included words from a prophet in order to show that the presence of Jesus was connected to and a continuation of the tradition his audience was a part of. Our lectionary helps us with this connection by pairing the text from Exodus with the text from Matthew.

Both of the texts share a few things. Both take place on a mountain top; both Moses and Jesus went to the mountain top with others; both include a cloud, a voice, shining face and clothing, and a period of six days. The cloud appeared on Mount Sinai for six days, and Matthew gives a time line of “after six days.” If we only wanted to talk about one of these texts or the other, the meaning might not be the same. But it’s not the meaning that Matthew is going for. For Matthew it’s the connection between the two that is important.

God spoke to Moses in the Exodus text. The glory of the Lord came through Moses. But for Matthew the glory of the Lord came in person – the person of Jesus. When Moses and his friends came down from the mountain they had instructions from God through Moses. When Peter and James and John came down from the mountain they had God.

Our scripture lessons during the season of Epiphany have been taking us along as witnesses to the recognition of who Jesus is, how the disciples came to follow him, and descriptions of what a life of a follower of Jesus will be like. Just prior to this transfiguration scene, Matthew 16 tells of Jesus asking his disciples who *they* say he is. They answer that Jesus is the Messiah. With that understanding then, Jesus goes deeper and describes not just the kind of people followers should be, but the kind of life followers will have. Jesus had begun telling his disciples that as the Messiah he will undergo great suffering in Jerusalem, and be killed, and rise after three days. In one quick chapter, Peter goes from understanding that Jesus is the Messiah to denying Jesus. Peter doesn’t understand, nor would we, that being a part of the world of the Messiah is not going to be great triumph and immediate gratification. Peter says, “No!” The things Jesus describes as in his own future do not mesh with Peter’s idea of a savior.

Peter wants to prevent this harsh future from happening so just before our text for today in chapter 16 we read,  “Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him, saying, “God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you.”’ Peter wanted to hold onto the triumphant messiah then, and he does the same in the transfiguration scene. Peter wants the magnificent, Jesus, Moses and Elijah trio to remain so he offers to build them three tents right there and then. But Peter can’t keep this scene forever either. The triumphant Messiah, the transfigured amazing sight of glory, those are not circumstances that can be contained and protected. They aren’t meant to be final. The voice from the cloud, in the same words spoken at Jesus’ baptism during the first week of Epiphany, come to us again, “This is my son, the beloved, with whom I am well pleased.” Again, reminding the disciples of the continuation of God’s work in the world through Jesus. And the voice adds, “Listen to him.”

Maybe the disciples understood in one moment, how what they were a part of was unlike anything on earth they had ever seen or considered. Maybe they knew in just one moment that their lives would never be the same. Whatever brought about their fear, Jesus came to them. Jesus came to them and touched them and said “Do not be afraid.” I have to imagine that that walk down the mountain, having heard God’s voice, having been touched by God and assured that there was no need to be afraid – was a very long quiet walk back down to the land.

The God of all time and place, who spoke through the prophets, and to Moses and Elijah, who came to earth in the person of Jesus, comes to us when we are afraid. We don’t need to go looking, God comes to us. Jesus, the one of whom God said, “This is my Son, the beloved.” touches us and gives us strength. After experiencing God’s glory, coming back down to reality might seem so ordinary. Ordinary is where the poor are; the hungry, those who mourn, the meek, those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, the merciful, that’s where the pure in heart and the peacemakers are. The blessed ones.

The transfiguration is the epiphany above all of Epiphany. What has been revealed and uncovered for us during the season of epiphany is what we take with us as we walk down the mountain after witnessing the glory of God. We have the presence and Love and Grace of God, the touch of God, the assurances of God, all with us as we move through our lives down here where those blessed ones are. How we will be a part of God’s mission, what lies ahead of us, who we are on the inside, those are all questions for the next season of the church year, Lent. Ash Wednesday is in just a few days. At our 7pm service here on Wednesday we have a chance to first remember the birth of Jesus, the joy of the light and the glory that Jesus is, and then use that knowledge to consider how we will move from the dust from which we are made, into the light of the world that we are born to be.

Just as Palm Sunday will move from celebratory palms to cries of pain and betrayal, today too the glory of the transfiguration moves from the shining mountain top reminder of baptism and God’s glory to the quiet self reflection of Lent. Let us enter this cycle of life with Christ, knowing that despite coming down from the mountain, and despite the cries of pain and betrayal, our eyes are always on the truth and wonder and glory of Easter when we remember that no matter what, Christ has risen.

Let us pray…

1Interpreter’s Bible Commentary, Matthew, p.366.