

“They Saw His Glory”

Exodus 34:29-36, 2 Corinthians 3:12—4:2, Luke 9:28-36

Transfiguration of Our Lord

February 7, 2016

“They saw his glory!” Wow! What an immense profession of faith this is that St. Luke is sharing with us in our Gospel lesson today! And yet, the Bible teaches us that it was not only the people of Israel, or Moses, or Peter, or James and John whom has been given the great privilege of being able to “see” the glory of God but that you and I still have the same opportunity to witness the glory of God for ourselves today too! After all isn’t this what God promised every one of us, when he said through the prophet in Isaiah 40:5 one day: “And the glory of the Lord shall be revealed and all flesh shall it together; for the mouth of the LORD has spoken it!”?

But what do you think of, dear friends, when you hear that phrase: “The Glory of God”?

In the Bible, this means that there are times in our spiritual walk, as people of faith, when the real presence of our God can become so absolutely, overwhelmingly evident to us in this life; that we can then shout out loud to the whole world ourselves, those same words that St. Paul shared with Timothy one day: “For I know on whom I have believed and am persuaded that he is able to keep what I have committed to him until that day” (2 Timothy 1:12)!

(1). The first time we read in the Bible about someone coming to see the glory of God, or experiencing the glory of God for themselves concerns the people of Israel, soon after they finally been released from those 400 years of dreadful slavery under the harsh rule of the pharaohs in Egypt. This is when we read in Exodus 13:21-22, “And the LORD went before them by day in a pillar of cloud to lead them along the way, and by night in a pillar of fire to give them light, that they might travel by day and by night. The pillar of cloud by day and the pillar of fire by night did not depart from before the people!”

The pillar of cloud by day and the pillar of fire by night were both one and the same cloud, the visible sign that the people of Israel needed to assure them that he was really present with them.

BUT IN THIS WAY GOD WAS ALSO ACTUALLY PROTECTING HIS PEOPLE FROM THE FULLEST IMPACT OF HIS DEITY. God shielded his people by hiding himself inside of this gigantic envelope of light; and certainly no one mistook it as any sort of natural phenomenon.

At this point, the children of Israel still had not crossed the Red Sea or celebrated God’s deliverance of them in that mighty act in a joyful most jubilant way!

At this point God had not yet called upon Moses to pick up a log and throw it into a body of water called “Marah” that means bitter, so that it might become “sweet” and absolutely refreshing to the Hebrew people who drank from it freely!

At this point God had not yet caused the manna to rain down from heaven, freely and fresh each morning!

At this point Moses had not yet ascended to the top of Mount Sinai to receive the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20:1-17), though he would do so. And while Moses would be there he would also receive a whole host of information from God, including laws about the Sabbath and certain Festival days, the ordination and consecration of priests.

It was during those 40 days and nights that God also gave very specific instructions to Moses on how to build the Ark of the Covenant and which items were to be placed in it. God told Moses how he was to design the “Tent of the Tabernacle” that would be also a powerful reminder for them of God’s real presence with them as they would soon be making their way to the Promised Land.

Well, you remember that when Moses did come down from Mount Sinai with the Ten Commandments on those two tablets of stone the first time that he was so shocked to see the people of God dancing around the Golden Calf—a blatant form of idolatry if ever there was one. And being the human being that Moses was, made in the image of God, with a proper sense of justice and righteous indignation of his own, he furiously threw down those two stone tablets of the Ten Commandments to the ground and smashed them!

Friends there were times when the people of Israel themselves did not want the LORD GOD ALMIGHTY to come to them so closely, and they said so openly, just as there are times when people in this world did not want the LORD GOD almighty to come to close to them today? Why? Because who really wants a god they can’t control? To believe in the true God is to face up to the fact that there are many things perhaps in this world that we can’t control.

Well, you also remember how Moses after some time went up upon that mountain, a second time. And there God gave him on those two stone tablets a fresh copy of the Decalogue—another word for the Ten Commandments.

But wonder of all wonders—when Moses came down from the mountain his face was glowing with the glory of God! That's what we learn in our Old Testament lesson from Exodus 34: "When Moses came down from Mount Sinai, with the two tablets of the testimony in his hand and he came down from the mountain, Moses did not know that the skin of his face shone because he had been talking with God. Aaron and all the people of Israel saw Moses and were afraid to come near him!"

(2) Moses was the man who had witnessed the glory of God in the most personal and intimate way! And while he was on the mountain we read in Exodus 33:18: "Moses said to God, 'Please show me your glory!' God initially replied to Moses's request by saying: "You cannot see my face, for no one shall see my face and live!" Nevertheless, the God who always answers our prayers, sometimes with a "yes" and sometimes with a "no" and sometimes with a "not now but maybe later," ended up giving Moses a littler fuller glimpse of his glory that day.

He did it when he commanded Moses saying: "Go over there Moses and place yourself like a wedge into a gigantic cleft in the rock!" Then God passed by so quickly that all Moses could really see was God's back side! But this was more of God's real presence than any other human being had ever been allowed to see or experience before.

And you probably know that this Biblical text later became the inspiration for a hymn writer named Augustus Toplady in the 18th Century, to write the words of that marvelous hymn: "Rock of Ages, cleft for me, let me hid myself in Thee! Let the water and the blood, from thy riven side which flowed, be of sin the double cure; cleanse me from its guilt and power!" (LSB 761:1).

(3). When Moses eventually did descend Mount Sinai for a second time with a fresh copy of the Ten Commandments once again in hand, the Biblical writer us that he was unaware of the fact that his face was radiant with God's glory (Exodus 34:19-35). Of course, Moses' radiance soon began to fade! But in time God would create two more successive "repositories," where the glory of God would later be placed.

(4). The first of these two places would be the Tent of the Tabernacle that the children of Israel carried with them wherever they went throughout those 40 years of their wilderness wanderings.

(5). The second of these two places was Solomon's temple that was built some 400 years later. It's interesting that on the day when the temple was dedicated, and Solomon had finished his prayers --- that the "glory" of the LORD filled the temple so completely, that the people there could hardly see one another.

Unfortunately, some 400 years later, Israel's history sadly reveals that over time the Hebrew people came to use the temple as more of a place to glorify themselves rather than to glorify God. The temple, created to be a house where God's glory would be made visible and manifest, eventually degenerated into a place where people chose instead to promote their own human notions and ideas! Over the years, despite some bright spots, the spiritual slide continued downward until we read that one day the glory of the Lord eventually vacated Solomon's temple completely.

In Ezekiel 11: 23, we read: "Then the glory of the LORD departed from over the threshold of the temple—moving slowly away and to the east and upward from the city where it had lingered above the Mount of Olives" – and tragically enough, then it was gone!

The next time we read about the glory of the LORD being revealed to human beings in the Bible is on that most Holy Night of our dear Savior's birth! Luke tells us back in chapter 2: "And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks by night. And angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone round about them, and they were filled with fear. And the angel said to them, "Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of a great joy that will be for all the people. For unto you is born this day a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. And this will be a sign for you: You will find a baby wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger" (Vv. 11-12)! Once again, the glory of the LORD God Almighty had returned among human mortals in the Person of Jesus Christ and was reflected once again into this world by that most glorious angel! "And then suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying: "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!" (V. 14)

The shepherds went to see this great thing that had come to pass, as it had been made known to them by the angels, and then St. Luke tells us: "The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all

they had heard and seen, as it had been told to them!" (v. 20) Of course, in these great events surrounding the birth of our Savior, there were flashes of his glory at the time of his first coming, at his initial advent into this world. But during the next 30 years, as the Son of God quietly approached his bar mitzvah and grew into the full maturity of his manhood, the glory once again was veiled.

But at the day of our Lord's own Baptism, the glory of the Lord was again becoming outwardly revealed when the sky opened and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in the form of a dove and the voice of his Heavenly Father spoke out loud from: "This is my Beloved Son with whom I am well-pleased!" Two weeks ago on January 17 we heard about Jesus changing the water into wine at the Wedding Feast of Cana. And you remember what St. John tells us as his concluding words to that whole event in John 2:11, "*Now this is the first of the signs Jesus did at Cana in Galilee, and manifested his glory. And his disciples believed in him!*"

Then in Luke 4 we heard how Jesus's glory was reflected when he read those words in the synagogue in his home town of Nazareth--from the Prophet Isaiah, "*The Spirit of the Lord is upon me because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor, liberty to captives, recovery of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those oppressed and proclaim the year of the Lord's favor!*" Jesus reveals his glory when he casts unclean demons out of people, when he heals Simon's mother-in-law, and so many of the sick people who were brought to him later that evening in Capernaum with various diseases (Luke 4:38-41). Luke chapters 8 and 9 successively show Jesus begins to show God's glory to the world once again when he calms a raging storm at sea with those three simple words: "Peace be still!" (Mark 4:39; Luke 8:22-25). And in chapter 9:10-17, Luke shows us that Jesus was beginning to show forth the glory of God as the Lord of creation when he feeds those 5000 people with the five barley loaves and two fish.

But the glory of God as revealed through Jesus' life and ministry becomes far more profound and absolutely brilliant that it had ever been manifested in this world before when Jesus takes Peter, James and John with him up there with upon that mountain (perhaps Mount Hermon) WHERE HE IS GLORIOUSLY TRANSFIGURED BEFORE THEM.

You know, brothers and sisters, when I was a much younger pastor, and sought to prepare my sermons to be preached on this Feast Day of the Transfiguration of our Lord, I remember that I had a great tendency to focus a WHOLE lot more of my own personal attention on that great religious experience that took place there that day--that Peter, James and John had all become privy to! And honestly, I discovered that our Gospel lesson, 25 or 30 years ago, was a much more difficult text for me to preach because of it!

But now in the latter years of my ministry, perhaps in the homestretch if you please, I can see that the real emphasis should not so much be placed upon the religious experience itself, as it should be placed upon the message that the LORD God almighty was communicating not only to his only-begotten Son Jesus Christ, who in his humanity, though free from all sin, still needed the encouragement that the prophets Moses and Elijah surely provided for him there on that day!

Every bit as important, if not far more important, was the message that God the Father was communicating to Peter, James and John about Jesus the Promised Messiah.

Earlier in Luke 9, we read that Jesus had just asked his disciples that profound question on the road to Caesarea Philippi, "But who do you say that I am?" And while Peter got the answer right: "*You are the Christ of God!*" (Luke 9:20), St. Matthew tells us that Jesus, while complimenting Peter on his answer, also cautions Peter about not claiming too much of the credit for his coming up with the correct answer for himself!

"Blessed are you Simon bar Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you but my Father in heaven!" (Matthew 16:17).

Yes, immediately after this Jesus tells them: "The Son of Man must suffer many things at the hands of the elders, and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised!" But it's St. Matthew who tells that Peter would not listen to any of this. Instead, Matthew tells us: "Peter took Jesus aside and began to rebuke him!" And here the verb "rebuke" is the same word that Matthew uses to tell us about Jesus rebuking demons out of other human beings. In a word, Peter started giving Jesus a lecture: "Far be it from you, Lord! This shall never happen to you!" But Jesus turned to Peter and said, "Get behind me Satan for you are a hindrance to me! For you are not setting your mind on the things of God but on the things of man!" (Matthew 16:22-23)

The greatest temptation that came to Jesus was the temptation to try and reveal himself to the world apart from the cross, just as there are some people today who want to teach lessons to others from the Bible but who forget all about the most central message of the cross!

Already on the Mount of Transfiguration we can see that Peter was much more interested in staying up there on top of that mountain and basking in the glory of God a little while longer, but Jesus refused to stay there because he knew that he had to come down from that mountain because there a world full of sinful people whom he had come to redeem.

So isn't this why this great event of the Transfiguration becomes the perfect bridge between the Epiphany Season and the Season of Lent. The primary way that you and I can ever come to see the glory of God for ourselves in this world is to be found at the foot of the cross! And isn't this also what Paul said one day to the Galatians: "Far be it from me to glory, except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world has been crucified to me and I to the world!" (6:14)

Peter had correctly answered Jesus' question, when Peter identified our Lord as "*The Christ of God,*" or the "*Messiah of God.*" Yet just because Peter had the right title for Jesus did not mean he had the correct understanding of our Lord's title in his head at that time, for we know that he didn't. Perhaps this is why Jesus takes Peter, John, and James along as he goes up onto a mountain to pray. As Jesus prayed, his face and clothing suddenly changed. He is transfigured and appears in heavenly glory.

It's almost as if God the Father had been eavesdropping on his only-begotten Son's conversation with his followers there that day on the road to Caesarea Philippi. He hears Peter's initial answer and listens to his Son Jesus correctly cautioning this extroverted fisherman: "*Blessed are you Simon bar Jonah!*" But then Jesus tempers his words of congratulations also with a warning. *Peter, don't get too big of a head over what you have just said: "For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you but my Father in heaven!"* But Peter's poor reaction to Jesus prediction about his coming death proves he didn't really understand who Jesus was at all.

Two famous Old Testament persons, long dead, appear there also with our Savior. The first was Moses the giver of the law at Mount Sinai. He had been privileged to enjoy intimate fellowship with the Lord (Exodus 33:12-23). He is the one who prophesied in Deuteronomy 18, "*The day is going to come when the LORD your God will raise up from you brothers one day a prophet who will be like me,*" in that he would initiate a New Covenant between God and man. Then Moses adds: "*Him shall you heed!*"

Elijah sure knew what it was to go through tough times as a prophet for sure. And so remembering that the Son of God had set aside many of his divine attributes in taking our place under the law of God, to fulfill all righteousness, we should not think for a moment that Jesus in his humanity would not have welcomed the encouragement these two great men of the Old Testament era was willing to give to him, because he did.

Friends those of us, who by the grace of God have come to see the glory of God revealed for this world in the person of his Son Jesus Christ, want to have an understanding of our primary mission in this world being like the one that Paul writes about to the Corinthians in our epistle lesson today. **WE ARE NOT LIKE MOSES WHO PUT A VEIL OVER HIS FACE, BUT WANT TO SHARE THE LOVE, GRACE AND THE MERCY OF GOD WITH EVERYONE WE CAN—BOLDLY AND CONFIDENTLY.**

PAUL SAID TO THE ROMANS, "I AM NOT ASHAMED OF THE GOSPEL OF CHRIST FOR IT IS THE POWER OF GOD UNTO SALVATION FOR ALL WHO BELIEVE, TO THE JEWS FIRST BUT ALSO TO THE GREEKS!" How can we really know if we have ever come to see the glory of God revealed for us in Jesus Christ or not? I believe the Bible gives us two straightforward answers to that question. (1) If we have come to see the glory of God revealed in Jesus Christ, then we will come to see ourselves in a whole new way as well, not simply as lost sinners, but as the redeemed children of God. Then we will say with St. John, "See what love the Father has lavished upon us that we should be called the children of God, for this is what we are!"

(2) Secondly, we will learn to look at other people in a whole new way too. That's what Paul said in 2 Cor. 5, "We no longer look at anyone from a human point of view," that some are more valuable or precious to God than others, for Christ died for all. Paul says, "We once regarded Christ that way, but now we do so no longer!"

St John must have had this Transfiguration Event in his mind when he wrote those words in the opening chapter of his Gospel: "*And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth. For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. No one has ever seen God; the only God, who is at the Father's side, he has made him known!*" (John 1:14-18) Amen