

They Saw and Heard His Glory

Luke 9:28-36

The text that we have before us both fascinates and frightens us. Something is taking place here that is beyond the power of humans to control. We become very nervous when we are in a zone where no longer we are in charge. You may not have noticed this in the reading, but the first half of our text stresses what the three disciples saw on the mountain. The second part of the reading stresses what they heard. Something took place there in the way they encountered Jesus. In this event they believed they saw and heard the glory of God. Or to put it another way, they had a full encounter with the divine presence of God.

Aside from it being on a mountain, no one knows where this actually took place. For ancient commentators a favorite spot was Mt. Tabor in Galilee. Tourists and pilgrims go up this mountain to visit. Several small chapels replicating Peter's clumsy attempt to build booths or tents to honor what happened there were built by the Franciscans. But we are not sure that this was even the place of the divine visitation; and, in any case, the text is telling us something different. The divine presence cannot be housed in tents. Above all it rested in a person -- Jesus of Nazareth. He was the one who manifested the divine glory.

Encountering the Divine Glory

What does it mean to encounter God's presence -- divine glory? Of course there are always those who say this is a vain search. There is a new resurgence of atheism today -- those who scoff openly at such an idea that there is such a thing as the glory of God. Richard Dawkins, the most famous of the new atheists has a quote in the foreword of his best selling book that drips with contempt. It says:

Isn't it enough to see that a garden is beautiful without having to believe that there are fairies at the bottom on it?

But most of us are not convinced with the direction in which he is going. When I was barely a teenager we used to have occasional visits in our home from our minister. He was an imposing man with graying hair, a walrus-like mustache, and he always had a double-breasted suit around his barrel-like chest. One day he arrived unexpectedly and my mother was not prepared to bring him into the home before she tidied up a bit. So she told me to take him out into the garden. We

walked around for a while. Nothing very much was said. What could I, a mere young boy, say to an imposing man like this? Then, as he passed one of our rosebushes he beckoned me over to him. He grabbed the stem of the rose, thrust the rose petals down in my face, and said, “And some people say there is no God!” Whether it is the creation itself or our viewing some great work of art there is something -- yes something -- that causes us to ask where does this work of glory come from? What is the purpose? Why is it here? There is a creator as well as a product. So we accept there is such a reality as the presence of God. And we believe it was found in Jesus.

When Peter, John and James saw Jesus in a form different from how they had known him before they knew something was up. The text tells us that they saw his glory (Lk 9:32). I think this means that they came to see who he truly was. Among the Jews there were many stories and traditions about Adam that embellished the biblical account. One of these that survives was that Adam had, as part of his personal glory, the right to be called king and priest and to wear a robe of glory. But with The Fall he was forced to forfeit the robe of glory. But now, perhaps, Luke is saying that on the mountain, through the bringer of the new creation, the robe of glory has reappeared in a different form: the presence of the divine in Christ. All who seek the divine presence or glory of the Lord are to look at Jesus. As the Gospel of John says:

And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us full of grace and truth; we have beheld his glory, glory as the only Son from the Father (Jn 1:14).

A Further Word on Glory

But still we ask. What does it mean to encounter the divine glory? Besides seeing Jesus on the mountain, Peter and the others saw something else. Two figures mysteriously appear and join Jesus in conversation. In the flow of the narrative they are recognized as Moses and Elijah. Not only that, the narrator brings us in on the conversation. We begin to eaves-drop. They are speaking about Exodus (the Greek word) or as it is usually translated -- Jesus’ departure. Here we find a bunch of clues about this divine presence. The text deepens our understanding of what it means to come into the divine glory. The word “exodus” or “departure” has several usages in the Bible. But in this context there is much more to it. Sometimes it just means “to go away.” Other times it is a metaphor for death. In his famous play “No Exit” Jean Paul Sartre creates a

scene in the afterlife in which three people are punished by being locked together in a room forever. The three have to co-exist some way even though they hate one another.

Although this scene is extreme (some think it was Sartre's expression of life in Nazi-occupied France) sometimes it is not far from the way we feel when life crowds in on us. "I just feel as though I am spinning my wheels." "What am I really accomplishing with my life?" "It just feels like the same old thing day after day." "What's the use anyway?" It is like being in a room with no exit.

But that use of Exodus is clearly not the message of our text. Even though this whole scene is a little eerie, we find within it not hopelessness but the wonderful news of the gospel of hope. For Luke is fairly clear about what is meant in this discussion on Jesus' departure. The term exodus, of course, goes back to the special time when Israel left Egypt and Moses led them out to the Mount at Sinai. There on the Mount, God gave Moses a glimpse of his glory. But only a glimpse. Now there is coming a new exodus or departure. It will be the departure of Jesus shortly in Jerusalem to enter fully into God's glory that is promised to him. Unlike Moses and Elijah who also visited the Mount, Jesus' departure through his coming death and resurrection will leave in its wake permanently a new creation. To enter God's glory means we have the blessings of living in the new creation. We are freed from being imprisoned in a life which has *No Exit*. Although the powers of evil are still around, through what happened in Jesus' life we have resources to defeat them.

As a kind of parable of this understanding, it is worthy of notice that immediately after Jesus comes down from the mountain he encounters a man with a son possessed of some kind of epileptic condition. The Bible refers to it as an evil spirit. No doubt many prayers were said by his family and friends. The disciples could not help. But God worked on the mountain and He works again the next day in Jesus' ministry. The boy is healed. As we await the full arrival of God's new world there are regularly those signs among us of the defeat of evil. But we must strive to be aware. These are the brief glimpses of his glory. Let us look for them and celebrate them as they appear among us -- more regularly than we suppose.

Conclusion

Toward the end of the Gospel of Luke, after Jesus had died and was raised, two dispirited former disciples, who had not heard the news, set out for Emmaus, a little village outside

Jerusalem. They were joined by a mysterious stranger. The conversation was intense about the events of the previous events. More and more Jesus explains to them the meaning of what happened. Then in Luke 24:25-26 he brings this to a climax:

O foolish men, and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Was it not necessary that the Christ should suffer these things and enter into his glory?

The glory of the new world that these forlorn disciples expected has been delayed. Instead, Christ, the Elect One, entered divine glory. For a moment Peter, John, and James saw and heard something close to what it is like to be in the divine presence. In the new creation of the Christian life sometimes we get a glimpse of it although it is never in our control. Maybe someone here today will get a fleeting glimpse of that glorious presence. But until then we live with the divine promise:

...beholding the glory of the Lord we are being changed into his likeness from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit (2 Cor. 3:18).

At present we nourish the desire to be more aware – more fully conscious – of this divine glory. As I Cor. 13:12 says, “For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face.” We are here today to claim this promise. When people are gathered around his word the Lord is present with us. God’s glory is all that we have when human glory runs its course. May we today seek it and find ourselves enveloped in its all-encompassing power.

Allan J. McNicol
Austin Graduate School of Theology
October 31, 2011