

Last Sunday of Epiphany
Rev. Doug Floyd
Mark 9:2-9

On the last Sunday of Epiphany each year, we return to the story of Transfiguration. Mark tells us that Jesus took Peter, James, and John up a high mountain. And He was transfigured before them. His clothes became radiant. Moses and Elijah appeared with Him, talking with Jesus. The disciples were terrified and in some accounts they fell to the ground. A cloud overshadows them, and they hear a voice saying, "This is my beloved Son; listen to Him."

Luke will tell us that the disciples saw his glory. Many of the characteristics in this story are consistent with the revealing of God's glory in throughout the Scriptures. When Moses meets with God on Mt. Sinai, there is smoke, and lightning and the voice of God is heard by the people. The typical response to such an unveiling is to fall to the ground in fear.

When Moses meets with the Lord in the Tent of Meeting, a cloud descends over the tent, and the glory of the Lord filled the tabernacle. When Moses comes out from the Tent of Meeting, the glory of the Lord shines out from his face. Moses must cover his face because the people are afraid.

Certain elements are consistent in these stories of God's glory come down. There is smoke or more properly clouds. The heavens have come down to earth. There is unapproachable light that is so overwhelming the people tend to fall down before it. And many times, the voice of the Lord is heard.

When the glory fills Solomon's Temple, the people fall to the ground and worship, proclaiming, "For he is good, for his steadfast love endures forever." (2 Chronicles 7:3)

The revealing of God's glory is transforming.

In addition to the Tabernacle and the Temple, there is a promise throughout the Scriptures that "the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together, for the mouth of the Lord has spoken." (Isaiah 40:5-6)

In fact, in Isaiah 60 we are told that the glory of the Lord will shine so brightly that we will no longer need the sun by day or the moon by night. Isaiah says,

The sun shall be no more
your light by day,
nor for brightness shall the moon
give you light;
but the Lord will be your everlasting light,
and your God will be your glory.
Your sun shall no more go down,
nor your moon withdraw itself;
for the Lord will be your everlasting light,
and your days of mourning shall be ended. (Isaiah 60:19-20)

In our story today, the same glory that filled the Tabernacle and the Temple shines out from Jesus. He is the Tabernacle, the Tent of Meeting. There is smoke or clouds, brilliant light, and the disciples fall to the ground. This unveiling of God's glory in Christ is connected to another story. Prior to this story, Jesus is speaking of being killed by the religious leaders. This story of transfiguration is pointing forward to the cross.

In John 17, Jesus connects the hour of his capture and crucifixion with glory. This is odd because there are no clouds, no brilliant light, no voice from Heaven and the people do not fall to the ground. And yet, the cross reveals the glory of the Lord. Across the ages of the church, Christians have often meditated upon the cross as way of beholding the glory of the Lord. It is a hidden glory revealed to those with eyes to see.

Let me pause here a moment and introduce a few thoughts from Hans Urs Von Balthasar. I'm re-reading his book *The Glory of the Lord, Volume 1*. This is part of a seven volumes series on beauty. Von Balthasar argues that Beauty, Truth, and Goodness are three overarching categories that are vital to our reflections upon Christ. He suggests that both Protestants and Roman Catholics have only focused on truth and goodness or justice for over 500 years. As a result, truth and goodness have gotten out of balance.

Truth can easily become a weapon used to cut people off from us who don't believe exactly like we do. Think of all the church splits that have resulted from a minor difference. Also, consider how goodness or justice can be warped. How many people have been wounded unjustly in the name of church discipline. Or consider how justice can become violent and result in chaos in our own culture. Think of all the people who have been wrongly hurt or even killed in the name of justice.

Von Balthasar says the justice and truth are vital when properly balanced with beauty. He says our world has passed through different ages in relation to form or beauty. There have been ages when people properly understood the differentiation between people and the proper role of beauty. We all play a distinctive role in our world and our church.

He also mentions two characteristics that look like the age we live in. After the Enlightenment, our modern world became infatuated with analysis: that is breaking things down into bits and studying each bit. Psychology is born out of this kind of analysis. According to Von Balthasar, we no longer see the whole of a person, but we focus on little bits. Think of the words we apply to individuals and families today: autistic, ADHD, dysfunctional. Instead of seeing the whole person, we focus on one or two areas, and that blinds us to the beauty of the person standing before us.

Von Balthasar also suggests we live in an age of disfigurement. People begin to despair the dignity of existence. This sounds so much like our world. There is confusion about identity and personhood. We can only see all the problems facing our culture and our world, and it's easy to despair. We've lost our eyes and ears for the glory of the Lord and instead focus on our own failures and the failures of our world. We need His grace to open our eyes afresh to His glory.

Now back to the disciples. Why do the disciples follow Jesus? Does He threaten them with hell if they fail to follow Him? No. Does He overwhelm them with guilt, so they follow Christ out of

guilt and shame? No. We might better understand their obedience even to death by considering marriage.

When two people fall in love, they are ready to abandon everything for the other person. Falling in love changes us. For those who fall in love and spend their lives learning how to live into their vows, they become an image of love and even glory.

In a similar way, the disciples have beheld the glory of the Lord in Jesus Christ. They have been enraptured by His presence, His words, His very life. As Peter so aptly says at one point, “Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life, and we have believed, and have come to know, that you are the Holy One of God.”¹

The beauty of the Lord overwhelms us and disarms us. If you follow Christ out of fear or guilt, you are following Him out of your own ability. Instead, we follow out of love. It is truly the love of God that has grasped your soul. You have tasted and seen that the Lord is good.

We don’t all have a Mount of Transfiguration experience, but we do behold and experience His glory in other ways. I think this is one of the beauties of the charismatic movement around the world. In spite of its flaws, many people have experienced the beauty and love of God the first time in a charismatic worship service.

If you feel yourself growing weary in well doing, ask the Lord to open your eyes and ears afresh to His glory. Sit with the Psalms and slowly read aloud the words, letting them soak deep into your heart. Or maybe you might read a spiritual book that edifies our soul. The goal is not to read as fast as you can or as much as you can but to soak in the wisdom revealed. I like to read theology and poetry because God has often used these to soften my heart and lead me into His presence.

When I have often felt overwhelmed by the darkness around and within, I found it helpful to go outside, listen to the birds, pay attention to the world around me. This has often helped me to hear and see the goodness of God afresh. As we heard earlier, “the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together, for the mouth of the Lord has spoken.” (Isaiah 40:5-6)

We pray for eyes to see and hear His glory in the world around us.

Finally, music is so important. Whether we listen and sing along to worship music or simply listen to instrumental music, our hearts are often opened to His goodness.

Scripture tells us that we are moving from glory to glory. His glory is changing us. We are being glorified in His love and kindness. We are becoming images of His glory in a world of darkness. Instead of focusing on the darkness around us, we focus on the Lord and trust Him to reveal His light and love through us. We live for His glory and in His glory. “For we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another. For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit.”²

¹ *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), Jn 6:68–69.

² *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), 2 Co 3:18.

Everything we do is taken up into His glory. As Paul exhorts us, “So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God.” (1 Corinthians 10:31)