

Eyewitnesses of His Glory

In the name of the beloved Son of God in whom the Father is well pleased, dear friends in Christ: As you look through the Scriptures it isn't long before you notice a recurrent theme which has to do with mountains; namely that the Lord chooses to reveal himself to people – or perhaps more of himself – on mountaintops. We see one such instance in today's Old Testament lesson in which the Lord shows himself to his people Israel on Mount Sinai. Here he comes down in such a way that he can be seen visibly by them, and yet at the same time he veils himself in a cloud because no sinful person can look upon the fullness of God's glory and live. And even then, with the Lord shielding them from the full force of his glorious presence, his appearance is still fearsome. The cloud is full of lightening and roaring thunder. It covers the top of the mountain, burning it with fire so that smoke and the glow of the flame add a threatening aspect to the cloud that conceals God's holy presence. We read in earlier chapters how the people stood quaking before him at the base of the mountain. And when the Lord began to speak to them to issue his laws and decrees, they begged to hear no more of his words for fear that they would all be destroyed in an instant.

And so it should be with all of us when we hear the Law of God. This is the image we should keep in our minds. When we are subjected to even a little of the searing light of God's perfect standards, our sins and evil inclinations are exposed, and we see clearly how we really are as we stand before him: wretched sinners, naked, ashamed, unclean. And so when he comes to us speaking his holy Law, we *should* be mortified – literally terrified to death, because that is the penalty for sin: death and eternal separation from God. That's what we learn from the Lord's frightening appearance on Mount Sinai.

But then, on a more heartening note, in the Gospel lessons for the past several weeks we've been getting an altogether different revelation of God on a mountain: The Lord Jesus sitting with his disciples preaching the Sermon on the Mount. Here again, the awesome, holy God is fully present but largely veiled from sight – this time not in a cloud, but rather in a humbler, less intimidating form: concealed in the body of a man; a very ordinary looking man named Jesus. And in the body of Jesus the holy God becomes approachable; he becomes *accessible* ... there's no fear or terror experienced by those who sit listening to the words of grace from his lips. Instead, the message is pleasant, encouraging ... it's inspiring to hear. It heals broken hearts and gives hope and life to his hearers. And it seems that somehow we are now dealing with a kinder, gentler God.

And today, on the mount of Transfiguration, Jesus brings these two very different mountaintop disclosures of God together, and in a sense he blends Mount Sinai and the Sermon Mount for us. You might say that he brings the two peaks together. We see, on one hand, some of God's bright glory. We see it first in a way that is not so much frightening as it is spectacular and awe-inspiring, as the body of Jesus undergoes a metamorphosis and begins to emit bright rays of light. He who is the Light of the world begins to shine as he did on that first day of creation when the Father spoke, "Let there be light." And then we see the glory increase to terrifying levels when a bright cloud like that which covered Sinai suddenly appears and envelops the mountain. And just as he did that first day of creation when he saw that the Light was good, the Father now again expresses his approval of the Light of the World. Speaking from the cloud he says, "This is my beloved Son, with him I am well pleased. Listen to him."

This increase in the appearance of God's majesty is overwhelming to the three disciples who are with Jesus. Like the Israelites at Sinai, they fall on their faces in abject fear, trembling at the voice of God. But then we see the Sermon Mount experience again as Jesus reaches down to touch his disciples. They feel the physical contact with the body of Jesus and hear his gentle words, "Get up; don't be afraid." And their fear vanishes. And we know that the reason for this is that Jesus Christ, the Son of God, is the Peacemaker. In his body he bridges the singap that separates God and man. Just as he brings the two peaks together, so on the mount of Transfiguration we see him bring the opposite poles of God's glory and fallen man together. Peter, James, and John become eyewitnesses of God's glory – and the remarkable thing about it is that because of Jesus, because he is with them, they live to tell about it.

And what's interesting is that also appearing on the mount of Transfiguration with Jesus are the other two men who during their earthly lives actually saw God's glory (or at least some of it) and lived to tell about it. Not coincidentally, they both saw it on Mount Sinai. One, of course, is Moses. As we heard this morning, he spent forty days on Mount Sinai receiving the Law from God – not just the Ten Commandments, but also all the laws covering every aspect of life and worship for the Israelites. Anyway, it happened when Moses was about to go back down the mountain that he said to the Lord, "You know, you've asked me to lead these people of yours, but you haven't shown me who you are. I want to see your face." And the Lord said to Moses (and I'm paraphrasing here), "All right, I'll tell you what I'll do: you stand over here in this cleft in the rock. And I'll put my hand over you while my glory passes by, and then as I'm leaving I'll take my hand away, and you can peek out and get a quick look at my backside – because you cannot see my face and live."

So that's what happened. Moses got his brief glimpse of divine glory – albeit, not the Lord's face like he hoped for, but rather (and you're going to have to excuse me here) he saw the Lord's seat, his hindquarters—that's what the word used there means. Jokingly I've said it's as if Moses asked to see the sun and the Lord showed him the moon instead. But the thing to see is that Moses saw part of the Lord that we would consider shameful and embarrassing. That's how God revealed his glory to Moses. It's not what he was expecting, I'm sure.

The other Old Testament eyewitness of God's glory who reappears on the Mount of Transfiguration is Elijah. There was a time in his earthly life when he too wanted a glimpse of God. He was suffering a severe bout of spiritual depression and so he fled to Mount Sinai with the hope of seeing God. His enemies were trying to kill him and his once strong faith was nearly shattered. He wanted to give up. So, upon arriving at Sinai, he found a cave on the mountain and hid in it. And there the Lord spoke to him: "What are you doing here, Elijah?" Elijah poured forth his tale of woe. And in response, apparently to give him the spiritual boost he needed, the Lord said, "Go stand near the mouth of the cave, for I am about to pass by."

Perhaps you remember this story: how first there was a powerful windstorm that uprooted trees and broke great rocks to pieces; but the Lord wasn't in the storm. And then there was a tremendous earthquake that shook the foundations of the mountain; but the Lord wasn't in the earthquake. And then there was a raging fire that swept across the mountain; but the Lord wasn't in the fire. And then Elijah heard a soft voice whispering words – and he hid his face in his cloak, because he knew that now he was in the presence of God's glory. Just a quiet voice: that's how God revealed his glory to Elijah. I'm pretty sure that's not what he was expecting.

Nor were Peter, James, and John expecting what they saw on the Mount of Transfiguration – but in their case, I think it's safe to say that they got much more than they

were expecting. They were quite used to the humble, relatively unimpressive presentation of God's glory that they saw every day. And that's remarkable. They called Jesus their Lord. They had seen him do spectacular miracles. They confessed that he was the Son of God. But the glory of God? No. He looked just like them. He was a man of flesh and blood, same as they were. He ate, drank, slept, sweated, got dirty ... he put on his tunic just like everyone else: two legs at a time. He needed to take care of all the basic necessities of life. Though the fullness of God's glorious presence was with them all the time, I doubt that they ever really thought about it.

And so they are amazed when Christ is transfigured before them. They begin to realize whom it is that they're dealing with. Their understanding begins to catch up with the words they confess about him when they say, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." And in reverential awe they want to preserve the moment. "This is wonderful", they think, "Let's keep it going." Peter suggests setting up some shelters so that Christ and his heavenly visitors can remain here. Why, it could become a shrine site. People could come and bask in the glorious light of Christ and the Old Testament saints. Or so they think.

But the sudden appearance of the bright cloud of God's glory demonstrates how futile that would be. Their naked terror proves to them that they are not ready for a full disclosure of God. They still cannot see his face and live. And so, for the time being, they are only allowed a peek, just a glimpse of his glory. And when the vision passes and they head down the mountain, Jesus tells them not to speak of what they've seen until after he has been raised from the dead.

And so we might ask, if they are not allowed to speak of it until later, what's the purpose in showing them this vision of Christ's glory now? Let me suggest that it's important that they know in advance exactly who it is that will die and be raised from the dead. Now, remember, they are not expecting what's going to happen. Just as they weren't expecting to see Christ's glory, they are even less expecting to see his humiliation and death. Though he will tell them repeatedly that he's going to Jerusalem to be crucified, the message will not sink in. And after this vision of glory, the very thought of it becomes even more unfathomable. The Lord of Glory crucified? Unthinkable. And so Jesus wants there to be witnesses of his glory now so that when the time comes, the full scandal of the cross will be apparent to at least some – who will then be his witnesses to others.

Because it is on the cross that Jesus will display the absolute vision of God's glory. But it will be revealed in a way that no one expects to see. It will be the backside of God. It will be his humiliation and shame. It will be something no one would care to look at. They'll avert their eyes and look down not in reverent awe but in gut-wrenching disgust. And yet the Lord will be revealing his glory in the great love he displays there in the shame and disgrace he bears for us. His glory will also be revealed in his still, soft voice: a voice asking forgiveness for those who are crucifying him; a gentle voice encouraging and rescuing a dying thief from hell; a voice abandoned and alone, calling out in the darkness to God who refuses to answer; a faint voice pleading for a drop of water; a subdued voice – barely a whisper – commending his Spirit into the hands of his heavenly Father. And Peter, James, and John will be eyewitnesses of this glory too.

This is the vision of God's glory he would have us see even today. The great evangelist Paul said as much when he declared, "I am resolved to know nothing among you but Jesus Christ and him crucified." And we can indeed be witnesses of this glory when by faith we see and understand the glory of the cross. It's in the body of Christ crucified that he really brings

together the opposing sides: God's holy presence and fallen man. On the cross is where the peace was made between God and man when Jesus suffered and died for our sins.

And today he continues to display this glory to us. He does it in his still, small voice that we hear speaking through his holy Word when it is read or recited in our worship. By it he causes us to tremble at the holy Law of God; and by it he removes our fear when he tells us, "Fear not, I am with you. Your sins are forgiven." And he stands among us and reaches down to physically touch us with this glory. It happened to each of us when we were baptized into his death and resurrection. Through the water, Jesus touched you with the glory displayed on the cross. And again, in the Sacrament of the Altar he touches us over and over with his very body and blood given up for our salvation. In these ways we are eyewitnesses of Christ's glory.

But it doesn't end there. In fact, it's only the beginning of how we see the glory of the Lord. We know that this glory is revealed in the body of Christ – but by revealing it to you, he also incorporates you into his body. You've become a part of him. So now his glory is revealed *in* you – but not like you might expect. It's not in bright light and spectacular visions; but rather in weakness, suffering, and humiliation – just like he showed it. We naturally want to seek the highpoints and prolong the mountaintop experiences; but Christ would have us see his glory in the valleys and plains. That's where you can see it the best: when you make a sacrifice of yourself for the benefit of someone else, when you forgive someone who has hurt you terribly, when you pray for an enemy, and when you serve someone with humility and longsuffering. Christ's glory is revealed in you when you comfort a person in mourning, when you reach out to the needy and outcast, and most especially when you speak the words of his still, small voice.

This is how we are to be eyewitnesses of Christ's glory – at least for the time being. Because we believe that there will come a day when we will see the Lord face to face in all of his heavenly splendor. Then we who have seen his glory already through the cross and shame will be able stand. We will have no fear in God's presence. But those who have not been eyewitnesses of the glory of the cross will be unable to bear the sight. They will be swept away to regions of eternal darkness. And that's why it's so important for us to make use of the time we have now to bear witness of what we have seen with our own eyes. To this end, may God grant us the grace to continue to see Christ's glory in the cross, and now that he has risen from the dead, to tell everyone what we've seen. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!