

## **“GLORY”**

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First Presbyterian Church, Bordentown NJ  
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Mark 9:2-9

As I prepared for this sermon, I pondered the meaning of the word “glory” - what it is, what it points to, and where might we see it? I was somewhat amused that my first sermon in this pulpit also used the word “glory” in the title, “Glory Revealed”, as Jesus turned water into wine. Today’s use is even more audacious. And yet, it’s a term I can hardly define, though I can think of its many uses:

For instance, it’s in the verse and the refrain of the Battle Hymn of the Republic (“Mine eyes have seen the glory . . .”). It’s in the title and text of the Gloria Patri, which we will sing later on in our worship service, in which we ascribe glory to the Trinity (“Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Ghost.”). It’s the basis of the angel’s song at Christmas - “Gloria in excelsis”, and it’s right there in the Lord’s prayer - “the power and the glory forever.”

Note how all but one of these examples comes from a musical source - now maybe that’s just my bias – or maybe it really is easier to experience “glory” through music than it is to define it in words.

I tried to find words for glory – in a thesaurus we find these synonyms: exhaltation, grandeur, brilliance, magnificence, majesty. It’s a noun for the brilliance of a star and the aura radiating from a manger. It’s also a noun for that aspect of God which is hidden by a cloud or by our sinfulness. Glory is also the offering which we bring: ascribing “glory to the newborn king”. It’s even a noun for a “place” in our meager understanding - the realms of glory. And, finally, it’s used as a verb: to honor or delight in something, like “In the Cross of Christ I Glory”.<sup>1</sup> In fact, the word glory appears in about 1/5 of the hymns in our hymnal. It’s so common, we no longer see it.

But glory as we read about it in today’s scripture is a dazzling state of being – A state of being which is indicated by the language of the passage: the “white robes”, a “mountaintop” revelation, and the “cloud”. These would all have indicated Jesus’ divinity to those in Luke’s audience who knew the history of Israel. They knew of the cloud by day and the pillar of fire by night. They knew of the cloud on the mountain where Moses encountered God. And they knew this glory was a state of being for God alone.

But . . . in the New Testament, it is also a state of being which is even to be shared with

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the Church, as in “the saints in glory”,<sup>2</sup> and references to us as “heirs of glory”. In Romans 8, Paul alludes to this twice when he says “so that we may also be glorified with him”, and “those whom he justified he also glorified.”<sup>3</sup> (Repeat.)

At both the Transfiguration and the Resurrection, Jesus’ body is a glorified body. This is the body we mean when we say we believe in the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting. Not flesh and blood exactly. But Jesus’ body did appear to the disciples in breaking bread and eating fish – the body which ascended in a cloud also walked on the road to Emmaus – and the body which could appear through a closed door also bore the scars from the cross.

So when we find ourselves puzzling over the paradoxical meaning of glory, it is probably due to the reality of our limited understanding. We speak of a spiritual body or a glorified body, but we have no idea what we’re talking about!

So, to get back to Luke, why did Jesus reveal himself prematurely in his glorified body? My guess is that this probably functioned for the disciples as a similar supernatural experience would function for us today – it was an incontrovertible reassurance of God’s power. A sign of hope that we all long for. The sure knowledge that God can overcome any physical limitation.

You may be familiar with our “liturgical year”, in which we reenact Jesus life’ and ministry and the beginning of the early Church: we begin with Advent and Christmas, proceed through Holy Week and Easter, and end with Pentecost – the birthday of the church! So also, we commemorate these mountaintop experiences in our worship cycle: the Baptism of Christ, the Transfiguration, and the Resurrection. In fact, we celebrate Easter every Sunday as a frequent reminder and symbol of hope before we go home to the valley of our work and mission or six days. And in a slightly larger sense, we celebrate the mountaintop experience of the Transfiguration before our descent as a Church into the valley of Lent and Holy Week.

It is the hope, hinted at, by these mountaintop experiences, that gets us through some of life’s crises. When I am faced with the suffering of a tiny child in the emergency room, or when I pass the body of a small animal on the roadside, or when I hear a friend’s despair and feelings of entrapment, I must fundamentally believe that God will make all things new.

And this is just what Jesus was providing for the disciples who were facing suffering and persecution – a mountaintop experience of hope. The words from heaven, “Listen to him”, referred at least in part to words Jesus had just spoken to the disciples, but which

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the disciples didn't want to hear: Jesus' prediction of his own suffering and death. They wanted the Messianic warrior who would defeat their political enemies. They didn't want a suffering servant, they wanted a vindicating leader.

Peter was faced with Jesus' predictions of suffering and persecution. Like us, he rejected even the thought of suffering for the faith, and was all too eager to welcome and prolong the glory – “Hey Jesus, let me build a couple of tents here, and we can all stay for a while, and hang out with Moses and Elijah!” But the voice from heaven commanded him – and us – to listen to Jesus' admonitions. Jesus did suffer and die. But scripture tells us he rose from the dead, his glorified body was witnessed by the disciples and they have testified to us. As these mortals faced imprisonment, ostracism, and even death, Jesus gave them an experience so that they could view their persecution against the backdrop of sure and decisive victory. It gave them hope in the midst of pain.

Likewise, today, Jesus doesn't save us from our problems. But, through the Holy Spirit, shares our journey and experience, and promises ultimate victory of truth over falsehood, good over evil, glory over fragile flesh and blood. Jesus is with us - whether perched on the edge of heaven, or in the valley of our daily lives.

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## **ENDNOTES**

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1. Also in #516, “glory in learning”
  2. Reflecting Revelation, chapter 7: hymn 75 “glory that the Church will share”, 346 and 426 re “shared” glory, 155 “to glorify the saints”, 526 “they in glory shine”, and #443 (an inclusive new creation) “glory of all things”.
  3. Romans 8:17 and 30.