

Matthew 17:1-9

## THE GLORY STILL SHINES

This true story took place a number of years ago. A woman went into an ice cream store, and suddenly she recognized that Robert Redford was also buying ice cream in that store. The woman was on the verge of swooning with ecstasy, but she was determined to remain calm because she didn't want to embarrass herself or invade her favorite movie star's privacy. So she bought an ice cream cone and left without saying anything. After regaining her composure outside the store, she realized that, while she had her change, she was missing her ice cream cone. So she went back inside and said, "I didn't get my ice cream cone." The man, who was working behind the counter, said in reply, "I'm sure I gave it to you, Ma'am, for I don't see it anywhere." Finally, Robert Redford, licking his own ice cream cone, spoke up and said, "You'll find your ice cream cone in your purse, Ma'am, right where you put it."

That story helps us to get a better handle on the myriad of thoughts and feelings that must have taken place within Peter, James, and John as they witnessed Jesus' transfiguration right before their very own eyes. What probably started out as a fairly ordinary day with their Master, up there on the mountain, all of a sudden took on an otherworldly atmosphere. For a moment in time, the disciples were allowed to see Jesus as he truly is in his heavenly glory. The curtain was pulled back to reveal Jesus not just as the Son of Man but even more as the Son of God in all of his celestial radiance.

Human words – whether written down in the gospel accounts or spoken in the context of a teaching lesson or sermon – cannot begin to describe this strange and wonderful encounter with the Holy up there on the mountain. The transfiguration of Jesus is a mystery that defies any rational explanations. It is truly beyond our finite ability to comprehend or explain. What happened up there is best left to our imagination and even that falls short of the revealed glory within that mountaintop experience.

While we cannot say precisely what happened, it's more important to address why the transfiguration of Jesus took place, and the answer to that question is found in the preceding chapter. For the very first time, the disciples (beginning with Simon Peter) began to comprehend that Jesus was the Messiah, the Son of the living God. The light began to dawn on them that Jesus was far more than just a devout rabbi. All of the pieces began to come together, and their minds were opened to the new reality that Jesus was not only sent by God, he was God in human flesh - in the very midst of them.

Jesus confirmed that very truth and then added another layer of understanding on to their God-given revelation as to who he truly was. Jesus explained how he must go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering, humiliation, and even death at the hands of the elders, chief priests, and scribes. Jesus also affirmed that on the third day he would be raised but the disciples had stopped listening after notice of Jesus' impending death. Peter tried to put a stop to such nonsense but Jesus rebuked him soundly and then went on to talk about discipleship in terms of

denying themselves, taking up their cross, and following Jesus (even to the point of suffering and death, if need be).

It's within this context or setting that Jesus was transfigured. The divine revelation given to Peter, James, and John assured them that the glory of God does shine in Jesus, but in Jesus Christ crucified and risen. The vision of the future offers the three disciples a glimpse of Jesus as he will be in the kingdom of heaven beyond his suffering, death, and resurrection. As a matter of fact, this future glory is the very same heavenly glory that Jesus laid aside in order to live among us. And yet, the divinity of Christ was not lost in taking on a fully human form. The transfiguration is the moment of disclosure that in this servant Jesus, no lesser god is present, but the Lord God, who has come for our salvation. Therefore, the voice from the cloud commanded the disciples to listen to the Beloved Son, and follow him to the cross, beyond, and into heavenly glory. Moses, Elijah, and the voice of God gave Jesus (and his disciples!) much needed encouragement at the right time for the way of the cross was looming larger on the horizon.

On the one hand, Jesus' transfiguration was a unique experience. On the other hand, the glory of God still shines whenever Jesus' disciples deny themselves, take up their cross, and follow Christ in the way that serves and fulfills God's will. In this lifetime, we won't be or see ourselves transfigured into the heavenly glory that awaits us. However, according to the Apostle Paul, "We all... beholding the glory of the Lord, are being changed into his likeness from one degree of glory to another" (2 Corinthians 3:18a). Our own nature can be transformed through our commitment to the Lord. As we walk with, work for, and live in close communion with the Lord, we are emptied of ourselves and we are filled with the glory of God. Then, as we live for and serve others, the glory of God shines forth.

Dr. Will Willimon tells about a group of church women who were looking for a service project in their community. They agreed that they might do something at the local jail. Their community was a favorite gathering place for thousands of college students, who flocked there on spring break and summer vacations. The students drank, got too loud, and a number of them would run afoul of the law. The jail was filled with unfortunate youths awaiting bail or fines. The women agreed that it would be nice to make up toiletry kits for the youth to make their stay a little brighter.

The women were taken back by conditions in the jail. There was no distinction made between older and younger prisoners or between first time offenders and repeat offenders. The more time the women spent helping unfortunate people in jail, the more they saw things they did not like. They noticed the attitude of the police and how they used excessive force on the prisoners. They heard rumors of money changing hands in order to get people lighter sentences. So, a group from the church went to share their concerns with the jailer. "I knew we were asking for trouble when we let you women stick your noses into things," the jailer told them. "You women ought to stay out of what is none of your business. What goes on here is really none of your business," he said. "Why don't you stick to church work and leave the legal work to us." "This is church business," shouted one of the women as she pounded her fist on the desk. Eventually, an investigation was launched. The jailer resigned. And gradually things changed

for the better. (What's Right With the Church, pp 75-78)

When we walk with and serve with Christ down in the valley of need and suffering – whether it's someone else's suffering or our own – then and there the glory of God still shines! Let us prepare to come to the table of the crucified, resurrected, and transfigured Jesus to commune with him and all others who name him Lord and Savior. Then, let us rise and go forth to serve others in loving compassion. As we do so, we will be changed into his likeness from one degree of glory to another and, what's more, we will give glory to God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

(Randall C. Stevens – First Presbyterian Church/Martinsville, VA – March 6, 2011)