

Exodus 34:29-35
Psalm 99

2 Corinthians 3:12-4:2
Luke 9:28-43a

Our Gospel lesson for this morning describes a rather different—if not strange—event. Jesus takes his three closest disciples, Peter, James and John, and they go up to a mountain top. All of a sudden, Jesus' clothes turn dazzling white, and his face literally shines. They see Elijah and Moses—who had long been dead—conversing with Jesus. Peter then declares, "Jesus, it is good we are here. Let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah. And then a cloud came and overshadowed them, and they hear a voice, "This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him." As one commentator suggests, this voice from the cloud was a quick rebuke. What is missing is the cosmic hand, reaching down to give Peter a good "you-are-missing-the-point" slap upside the head. Peter is not the only one confused.

We too may be confused. We may be wondering what is going on here. Bible scholars have had a difficult time trying to understand what was happening here. Some propose that it is a misplaced resurrection story. In the gospels the glorified Christ refers to the resurrected Christ. He received his glory because of his death and resurrection. The glorified Christ is the resurrected Christ. So this story may have been a resurrection account, and, for some reason, the story was located before the crucifixion and resurrection. Honestly, we really do not know. We may have to settle for the belief that this story is a mystery.

Our Old Testament reading is about Moses, and how his face would shine from being in the presence of God. He had been to the mountain top to receive the Ten Commandments from God. When the Israelites saw Moses' face shine, they were afraid to come near to Moses. In that day it was thought that if one got too close to God, one

would die. So whenever Moses was with the people, he wore a veil, and when he was in God's presence, Moses would take the veil off.

Both of these stories relate to the glory of God. They both take place on a mountain. And both of these are also a figurative mountain top experience. A mountain top experience has been defined as "any experience, religious or otherwise, that is uplifting, inspiring, life-changing, exhilarating, illuminating." Experiencing the glory, the people have a mountain-top experience.

Mystery provides a sense of awe that leads to a mountain-top experience. The sense of mystery is one thing missing in our modern world. In our post-enlightenment world, a world more rational and less mysterious than before the enlightenment. We excite ourselves with our discoveries. So much of natural phenomenon were mysterious, but now we understand, such as solar or lunar eclipses. Our post-enlightenment world is more rational, and much less mysterious.

This post-enlightenment context has tried to explain some of the phenomenon in Scripture. Back when I was in seminary, back in the Dark Ages, the Israelites crossing the Red Sea was explained as the Israelites crossing the Reed Sea. It was more of a marsh. Strong winds were known to blow across the Reed Sea and create a dry path. The miracle of the feeding of the five thousand was explained that everybody came with their brown bags, their picnic baskets, and everyone shared what they had with others. The miracle was the fact that people shared their food. So many of the sermons in the 50s and 60s were more rational, teaching about the faith, rather than being in awe of the mystery of God.

We want answers, not mystery. And yet there seems to be a fresh breath of air coming from the younger generation. They seek mystery. One of the reasons why the Eastern Orthodox Church is seeing renewed interest by younger people is the sense of mystery they have built in to their worship and worship space. God is a mystery and we stand in awe of that mystery. We will never understand everything there is about God while we are on this planet. Desmond Tutu wrote, "Somebody remarked that our praise will not end, because we will forever discover new aspects of God's beauty, holiness and goodness; for God is infinite, and we are and will always be finite, and so we will be "lost" in wonder, love and praise, as the hymn puts it." Mystery is what causes us to stand in wonder, in awe of God. It is what prompts us to worship God. There's a great Ziggy cartoon that has Ziggy standing on the edge of a cliff, admiring the sunset, and saying repeatedly, "Go God!" And that is what we do every Sunday morning when we worship God, we cheer, "Go God!" The glory of God is a mystery. We then stand in awe.

But there is more to our gospel lesson than awe and mystery. A theology of glory is incomplete without a theology of the cross. In fact, there can be no glory without the cross. There can be no glory without self-sacrifice, without selfless love. The lectionary gospel reading for today includes verses 37 through 43 parenthetically, that is, it is an option for the lectionary reading. But we miss something very important if we exclude this passage. It is the first event recorded after the Transfiguration. The day after the Transfiguration, Jesus exorcises an unclean spirit from a boy after the boy's father pleads with Jesus to heal his son. Jesus went from his mountain-top glory into the valley of people's lives. Life in the valley led Jesus to the cross. These verses are critical to

understanding the transfiguration story. Heidi Neumark uses these verses to tell a powerful story of transfiguration. In her memoir *Breathing Space: A Spiritual Journey in the South Bronx* details the transformation of the church she served for almost twenty years. Aptly named Transfiguration Lutheran Church, the community was struggling, barely surviving, when she arrived. Standing amid poverty and the myriad problems that can accompany such a demon—crime, drug abuse, lack of education and opportunity, lack of hope—Transfiguration mostly kept its doors shut tight to the world around it.

The work of Jesus rebuking the unclean spirit was example enough for Neumark. “When Peter and the others came down from the mountain,” she writes, “they found a father and a child grasping for life. But Jesus rebuked the unclean spirit, healed the boy, and gave him back to his father. And they found transfiguration. And so it is. When the disciples of this Bronx church unlocked the doors of their private shelter and stepped out into the neighborhood, they did meet the distress of the community convulsed and mauled by poverty.... But they also discovered transfiguration as a congregation in connection with others.”

Perhaps the reason Peter wanted to build three dwelling places, one for Jesus, one for Moses, and one for Elijah, is that Peter wanted to capture the moment and keep it. He wanted to keep the glory going. You have probably had those times in your lives when you have had such a good time, you hate for it to end. Peter did not want the glory to end. But they could not stay there. They had to leave the glory of the mountain-top and go down into the valley where the people were, where this man and his son had been waiting. There can be no mountain top without the valley; there can be no glory without the cross.

And in the temple of the Lord,
the people of God say: Glory! Amen.