

Shadow and Glory
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Some of you may know that we have been offering a second-hour adult education class called “Practical Theology.” For seven sessions, with seven different teachers, we try to wrap our heads around and express the theological concepts that frame and nourish our faith. In the first session, Kenneth Cracknell shared with us this quote from a 6th century theologian: “God is in no way like the things that have being and we have no knowledge at all of his incomprehensible and ineffable transcendence and invisibility.” And then another quote, from St Augustine a century earlier: “Not that the mystery might be spoken but that it might not be left unspoken.” Or, in the words of a more contemporary theologian: “If human words are incapable of describing the distinctive aroma of coffee, how can they cope with something as subtle as God?”

Speaking about God is therefore both impossible and, somehow, necessary to us. We sing songs like, ‘Immortal, Invisible, God Only Wise,’ in which we spend four verses dancing and shifting and moving around an experience of inaccessible light. Our Scriptures talk about a glory that is too powerful and immense for mortals to describe, though they are sure that it is real.

We may try to find ways around this by reasoning. If God is the Creator, we might find some clues in the created world or some correspondence with things in our physical experience. We know that we cannot reduce God to the level of a created object, but we allow things and words to be signposts to God. We make analogies. We use metaphors, all the while harboring the memory and hope of a glimpse of glory.

All through our Scriptures, we see mountains and clouds as part of this kind of vocabulary, sometimes called “windows into heaven.” Not that everyone shares this view of nature to the same extent: in some ways it takes a mystic’s eye to see the world this way. The 19th century naturalist John Muir was just such a man. When walking in the Sierras he wrote, “These blessed mountains are so compactly filled with God's beauty, no petty personal hope or experience has room to be the whole body seems to feel beauty when exposed to it as it feels the campfire or sunshine, entering not by the eyes alone, but equally through all one's flesh like radiant heat. . . .” I was in the Sierras last year, and I wonder whether he was just experiencing some lightheadedness because of the altitude. Muir’s companion, a shepherd named Billy, called the same place, “a lot of rocks and a hole in the ground.”

Whether we would describe Moses and Jesus and the disciples as mystics is an open question. But the stories we have before us today show us the struggle they had to put glimpses of glory into words, to say something essential about God with the poverty of human speech. Moses is pictured as having a conversation with God on Mount Sinai, at a crucial moment in the story of the Hebrew people. They have been freed from slavery. They are on the long road to the promised land, sustained by food and water given by this mysterious God. On this journey, the presence of God was represented by pillar of cloud and fire. Using Moses as a conduit, God has attempted to establish a covenant with the wandering Hebrews, whereby a relationship of trust, obedience and justice might begin. But before Moses can do this, the people have already gone back to old habits

and started worshipping idols. They borrow an image from the surrounding culture, a golden calf, and say, “This is what our Liberator looks like.” It almost puts an end to the special relationship they have with their true liberator. But Moses speaks for them, argues with God, and mends the broken bond. Divine wrath is turned away, and as we read today, Moses continues to worry that God’s presence will not go with the people as they travel on.

As we read, I note the wrestling of the writer to make this real for us. So many of the repeated words seem heavier, more loaded, than their literal meanings: “see” “I know your name” “favor in your eyes” “presence” “glory” “face.” For a passage that seems to be saying how unlike God is to a human, there are so many references to the human body: eyes, face, hand, back.

Moses wants this to be a physical encounter. “Pray let me see your glory!” A strange request: hasn’t God already demonstrated the divine glory for Moses when the seas parted and when the people were fed in the wilderness? Doesn’t he already speak to God “face to face,” like a neighbor or a friend? What is he looking for? More power, a deeper insight, more security, proof that God is really there?

The divine reply is interesting: that “all the goodness” of God will pass before Moses’ face. And the name of God will be called out before his face, along with a new definition of that name: one who shows mercy, one who shows favor, loyalty and faithfulness. This was the name of God that Moses and his people needed to hear in this crucial moment. They already knew that it was in God’s nature to be a liberator: they had traveled from slavery to freedom. They already knew that it was in God’s nature to be nurturing: food had appeared when they were starving. At this moment, when they were reeling from the experience of aimlessness and idolatry, this is what they needed to hear: God’s name is Mercy. And we get the feeling that these qualities, if we could feel the full import, the glory of them, would be too much for us. We would be overwhelmed if we really “saw” how tenderly God cares for us – if we really understood the extent of God’s justice and love.

In the Transfiguration story from the Gospel of Luke, we are on another mountain. Here we get another depiction of human limitation in the face of momentous visions. The disciples are heavy with sleep, but, then, when they are fully awake, they see people who could not really be there: prophets from the past talking about a New Exodus. Then a cloud comes, and brightness is replaced with shadow and fear. Peter and the other disciples are silenced by the encounter with glory. The text says that they did not tell anyone at that time about what they had seen. Perhaps, between sleeping and waking, between mountain clarity and cloudy shadow, they could not make enough sense of what had happened to be coherent at all.

So: two stories. One in which Moses **is** given a glimpse, under the protective hand of divinity, of what the presence of God might look like. One in which the disciples hear a voice that tells them to listen. The question we might ask today is: Do **we** ever get a glimpse of God? After the glory has passed by, can **we** see a footprint where God has walked, can **we** feel the hand shielding us, can **we** hear echoes of a voice? We speak in the vocabulary of the senses because we are bound into bodies. What partial revelation has been given to us? Would we know it if we saw it?

Thomas Merton once said, “We are living in a world that is absolutely transparent, and God is shining through it all the time.” That is a beautiful, in some ways a hopeful statement, but I am not sure that I am able to look at the world that way. It is a little too dazzling and a little too

challenging. Maybe I am overcome by sleepiness like the disciples, not yet fully awake. Maybe I am stuck in the cloud, and the voice is heard only intermittently. But I keep listening to Jesus, as I hear him in the Scriptures, hoping that I can catch a glimpse of the liberating, nurturing, merciful God who passed by Moses. Still, I wonder – can we handle the blinding, demanding, overwhelming face of God, or do we turn away because we cannot handle the implications of what that powerful love means for us and how we live?

Maybe the disciples' sleepiness looks like this: somewhere deep inside we don't believe that God is merciful and forgiving. We may not believe that God could forgive each hidden fault. We turn our faces away from that glorious possibility, because it implies that we could be more forgiving of each other. But, each time we forgive and allow a relationship to rebuild, the glory of God passes by in our own lives, and we catch a glimpse of God's tender and forgiving presence.

Somewhere deep inside we don't believe that God is present in times of human suffering. Pain is everywhere and healing seems rare. How could God work in places where all the knowledge of the medical profession fails? A long time ago, I saw a nurse in the intensive care nursery pick up and cuddle an infant who was comatose and dying. Love and tenderness were demonstrated in the face of a tragic death. I had to turn my eyes away. God's glory was a little too close. It passed by and said, "I reach out my hand to all who suffer. I need human hands to do this for me." God's glory is beyond words, is blinding, is demanding. It passes by, and calls us to follow.

Somewhere deep inside we may not believe that God is present in the workings of a local church. How could our mundane tasks ever be infused with any kind of "glory" as we limp along, trying to be a community of faith? How presumptuous of us to even consider that Divinity visits Norwich Vermont! And yet, this is the promise of our faith tradition. And, I have seen it happen, when this congregation wakes up to the needs and the challenges of our time, and takes action. I have seen it happen in small acts of kindness and in strong words of moral courage. The glory of God passes by, perhaps apparent only in retrospect, but real nevertheless.

Verbal descriptions of God fail us. I do not know which of the multitude of metaphors will speak most clearly to you. On the mountain and in the valley, in the clear sunlight and in the cloud, we struggle with the mystery that cannot be spoken, but only lived. On the road, in the wilderness, in the city, we struggle to be faithful on a journey. At the table, at the bedside, and yes, in the meeting room, we rejoice to be companions on that journey. Amen.