

Exodus 34: 29-35
2 Corinthians 3: 12-4:2
Luke 9: 28-36

Changed from Glory to Glory
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Dr. Martin Luther King famously said, in his last sermon, “I have been to the mountaintop.” He was referring to the story of Moses – not the story of Mt Sinai and the conversations Moses had with God there, but the story of Mt. Nebo, where Moses had a chance to glimpse the promised land, to which he would never go. There are so many mountaintop stories in our Scriptures: the image recurs again and again as a place where divine and human experience meet, where God is somehow present and people catch a glimpse of some essential truth. So we use the phrase “mountaintop experience” when something happens that blows our socks off, or when everyday cares drop away and we see what is really important. Moments of insight, moments of glory.

Because these moments often defy description...of course we try very hard to describe them. ☺ So did our ancestors in faith. When Moses came down from Sinai with the tablets of the 10 Commandments, people thought his face shone with an almost painful or frightening light. Something strange and holy was going on, so to make it more accessible, the story says that he veiled his face. The commandments of God were so powerful, that the one who received them was set apart with a veil barrier, lest ordinary people be somehow damaged. That is one way to describe a mountaintop experience.

Hundreds of years later, the apostle Paul gives a kind of critique of this story. In his letter, he says that this veil prevented the Hebrew people from recognizing that the law Moses brought down was not in fact ultimate truth. A more complete truth would be manifested in Jesus, a more glorious, liberating truth, that will allow us to grow more fully into the image of God. In other words, we don't need an actual mountain to have a “mountain experience” of glory.

And then we have the story of Jesus with 3 disciples up on a mountain, just as he is setting off for Jerusalem, told in three of the Gospels. It echoes the Old Testament story in some ways: a changed appearance, dazzling light, the presence of Moses. It says that Jesus and Moses and Elijah, in this glorious state, were talking about the “exodus” of Jesus in Jerusalem. To the disciples, this was a dream-like event. They were groggy with sleep, a little unfocused, but very impressed: impressed enough to think that a mountaintop shrine was in order. They are corrected by a terrifying voice from the cloud, which says, “Listen to my beloved child!” In other words, stop babbling about dwellings and shrines and follow Jesus.

So they do. It says that they kept silent and followed Jesus down the mountain. Away from visions, away from holiness, away from heavenly voices. Into a crowd, into pain and illness, into the dust and confusion and pleas for help. Still listening, the disciples hear the pain in that father's voice, hear the torment of the boy, hear the rebukes of Jesus. I'll bet they wished they were back up on that nice mountain. But here, in that crowd with a suffering child, something is revealed. It says that “all were astounded at the greatness of God.” God's power is not just a mountaintop power. Jesus goes to share it with the people, wherever they are. As the disciples listen.

Now, listening may not sound like a very **glorious** activity. It may not seem like an activity at all. But we have all had experiences of being truly listened to that are transformative. Listening requires an inner calm that does not need to prove or exalt itself through argument or declarations or self-justifying explanations. It is a different way of being present, and a kind of freedom to accept and receive. It offers to the speaker a kind of spiritual hospitality. It is an enlargement of the heart that gives the divinity within us a chance to expand.

I marvel at the fact that the only time these three disciples hear the voice of God from on high, they get one commandment: "Listen to Jesus." Not, "Go start a church." Not, "Bring other people up here so that they can have visions too." Before you do anything else, pay attention to what this beloved man is doing. What he is doing is going down into the hardest parts of common human life and offering help. This is what glory looks like. Glory sounds like a man who listens to a story of a parent's pain and says, "Bring your son here." Glory looks like someone committed to a difficult path, a new exodus, and does not turn aside. In 1968, glory looked like Dr. Martin Luther King traveling to Memphis to support justice for sanitation workers. In 2001, glory looked like a chaplain covered with dust, trying comfort victims of the attack on the world trade center. In 2016, glory looked like a group of people in this sanctuary, listening hard to a refugee from the Congo tell his story of exodus from his home country to find a new home here.

This insight that everyday reality is shot through with divine glory is very old, and pre-dates the Gospel story. It does not only happen on mountains, either. "Surely God is in this place - and I did not know it!" as Jacob says after a dream, during his flight from family conflict. "The whole earth is filled with God's glory", as the angels proclaim Isaiah's temple vision, during a season of political upheaval.

Our Scriptures are teaching us, all the time, to search out holiness, to search out glory, in everyday life, because glory resides in the healed child, in the healed relationship, in the generous heart, in the hardworking hands, in the dinner table conversation, and yes, even sometimes in the committee meeting. It's seems crazy, but it is true.

And I ask myself, "Where will we find glory here, in the Norwich Congregational Church, UCC?" Or maybe better, "Why shouldn't we find it here, as we make a common life together, as we listen to discover places of need and pain, as we listen to discover the gifts of each person here, as we empower and commission each other to serve the world to the glory of God. Isn't this the promise and challenge of the Gospel?"

As we move forward this year, starting with today's annual meeting, I hope that you will all bring your listening ears to our life together. Maybe even church organizational structure can be infused with glory! But I hope that you will find a way to follow Jesus, both up to the mountaintop and down into the valley, to the crossroads of life, where we will the image of God in each neighbor we meet.

I close with a prayer written by George MacLeod, founder of the Iona Community. He used the phrase, "The glory in the grey" to speak of God's presence with us.

*Almighty God, Sustainer:
Sun behind all suns,
Soul behind all souls,
Show to us in everything we touch
and in everyone we meet
the continued assurance of Thy presence round us:
lest ever we should think Thee absent.
In all created things Thou art there.
In every friend we have
the sunshine of Thy presence is shown forth.
In every enemy that seems to cross our path,
Thou art there within the cloud
to challenge us to love.
Show to us the glory in the grey.
Awake for us Thy presence in the very storm
till all our joys are seen as Thee
and all our trivial tasks emerge as priestly sacraments
in the universal temple of Thy love.
Amen.*