

Sermon for February 7, 2016 (Last Epiphany, Year C)
Offered by Nathan Ferrell at The Episcopal Church of Saint Mary

Texts: Exodus 34:27-35; Psalm 99; Luke 9:28-43

Know what:

So what:

Now what:

Title:

“Suddenly Peter and John and James saw two men, Moses and Elijah, talking with Jesus. They appeared in glory.” (Luke 9:30-31).

My friends: what IS the glory of God? And what can it possibly mean for people like you and me to experience – and to live in – the glory to God?

The glory of God is something that we talk about – and sing about – all the time in Church. We echo the song of the angels as we say (or sing): Glory to God in the highest. In the Great Thanksgiving, we always join the song of the heavenly beings before the throne of God who sing: Holy, holy, holy Lord, God of power and might. Heaven and earth are full of your glory.

In the Daily Office, the Church continually says or sings: Glory to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Spirit, as it was in the beginning, is now, and will be forever.

When you hear these words “the glory of God”, what is it that comes to your mind?

This may be something which is impossible to define in our language, but at least our lessons today tell us something about the **experience** of God’s glory.

This last Sunday of the Epiphany season is all about glory.

And these two biblical stories are forever linked in the mind and heart of the Church as some of our primary glimpses of God’s glory.

Moses climbs Mount Sinai to be in the presence of God for 40 days and 40 nights. On the mountain, he receives the word of God and his face shines with the reflected light of God’s glory.

It's an odd story, and it may sound slightly sacrilegious, but Moses seems to be just like those glow-in-the-dark toys which soak up the light when they are exposed to it and then slowly release it again once they are back in the darkness.

What we see here is that humans experience the glory of God as light – pure, uncreated, undefiled light.

Light always changes any form of matter which absorbs its energy – even in small and subtle ways, like UVB photons interacting with your skin causing the production of vitamin D.

Well, this divine light of God seemed to act upon Moses in a similar kind of way.

Next we come to the transfiguration.

The Lord Jesus climbs Mount Tabor to meet with Moses and Elijah in the splendor of heavenly light. On the mountain, he IS the Word of God and, in a way similar to Moses, the text states that the appearance of his face changed – one can only suppose that his face was also radiant with the light of God's glory.

These stories talk about the experience of God's glory, but they offer no explanations. The Bible rarely does. The Bible cares little for thoughts **about** God.

That is left to the thinkers of the Church, like Irenaeus – the Bishop of Lyons in the second century – who left us with an amazing thought which attempts to give some way of understanding the glory of God.

Irenaeus wrote this:

"The glory of God is a human fully alive; while the life of humans is the vision of God." [REPEAT]

Maybe this helps, but maybe it doesn't, because even this beautiful description leads us to another conundrum: what does it mean to be truly alive?

I had the privilege this past week to attend a seminar for area faith leaders with a group from Young People in Recovery. Young People in Recovery (YPR) is a group of young people – led and organized **BY** young people – who have themselves fought

against addiction, are currently maintaining their sobriety, and are willing to serve as a voice of advocacy for other young people continuing to struggle.

One of these young people shared his story. To protect his anonymity, we'll call him Peter. Peter grew up in a wealthy suburb of Boston with access to all of the resources he might need to achieve what society considers to be success.

But he was one of those who struggled to find a sense of meaning and purpose in life. What was the point of all the stress that felt suffocating to him? Was this all that there was in life?

In his community, however, it was clear that asking such questions was considered to be dangerous talk. Do not question, do not struggle – this was the implicit message which he heard from the adults around him.

And if you **DO** struggle, then figure it out quick and get yourself back on the track to success.

Peter just felt out of place in that environment. He did not feel like he belonged until the time that he discovered the escape of drugs.

Before too long, he became an addict. Things went downhill for Peter until he reached the point where he wanted to end his life.

He even tried to overdose so that – at the very least – his mother could be comforted with the thought that he had died from an accidental overdose rather than an intentional suicide.

But even that did not work. Eventually, with his mother's support, with lots of hard work, with the 12 Steps, and with reliance on God, he has begun his road of recovery. Now he is a sober young man in Portland who works every day to help other young people struggling to fight addiction in the same way that he did.

When we think of the glory of God as a human being fully alive, we might be tempted to think of this “**FULLY ALIVE**” as having it all together, as being beyond the reach of struggle and challenge, as having “success” as the world around us considers it.

The temptation is to think that we can and will most fully reflect the glory of God when we've got it all together, when we're perfect, free from faults and defects.

But that, my friends, is a lie. And it's a lie which undermines the full and complete and abundant life of so many of God's children.

Next week, as we gather for the First Sunday in Lent, I am going to invite all of you to join me in the ancient Rite of Forgiveness which comes from the tradition of the Greek Orthodox churches.

This is not going to be easy or comfortable for many of you. And that's okay. To look each person in the eye and to admit that we have failed, that we have fallen short, is to make ourselves vulnerable.

The glory of God is a human being fully alive.

My friends, I propose to you that to reflect the glory of God most clearly, to be most fully alive, is to admit our failure – over and over again. To own it. It is to be real.

Our Lord Jesus is the perfect One, the only sinless One, and he carried the splendor of God's glory in his soul – revealed for a moment on Mount Tabor.

But Moses was human like us. The text states that, after this encounter with God, Moses wore the veil in ordinary life.

The veil was taken off whenever Moses spoke with God and when he spoke with the Hebrews about the word of God.

To be honest, no one really knows what this means or why the veil was employed in this way, but one way to think about this is that the veil of Moses is a sign of what is possible when we are honest and vulnerable with God and with one another in the covenant community.

In those settings, Moses had nothing to hide and the veil was removed so that the full light of God's glory could shine on his face.

Perhaps when we meet with God, and when we meet with one another – that is the time when we too must remove the veil.

Perhaps what it means to be fully alive is NOT to be the most successful, the most put-together, the most polished, but rather to be the most vulnerable and honest.

To be one who can say, “I have failed, I have fallen short. Please forgive me.”

My friends: what IS the glory of God? And what can it possibly mean for people like you and me to experience – and to live in – the glory of God?

What would change for you if, every time that you heard the words “the glory of God”, you thought of a humble, vulnerable, honest person who was willing to come to God and to others and ask for help and forgiveness?

“The glory of God is a human fully alive; and the life of humans is the vision of God.”

Moses and Elijah were granted the vision of God.

Peter, John and James experienced the glory of God in the face of Jesus.

I don’t know how to define the glory of God, but I know where to look for it.

I know to look for it in the face of Jesus, and in the faces of his people who carry some of his light in an open, humble, honest and vulnerable heart.

For that is how God defines a human who is fully alive. Amen.

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