

Transfiguration of Our Lord
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Scriptures: Exodus 34:29-35, Psalm 99, 2Corinthians 3:12—4:2, Luke 9:28-43a

In our Gospel text for today we have two sets of events. The first one is the story of the Transfiguration of Jesus. It is the account of the day when Jesus went up a mountain with Peter, James and John. And there he was transfigured, his clothes became dazzling white, and Moses and Elijah came and appeared with him, “in glory” says the text. From this event we get the phrase about having a mountaintop experience, a particularly uplifting event in which God seems especially present and active.

The second event is the next day, back down off the mountain, among the people again, a great crowd. And among them was a man whose son had some unclean spirit that caused him to have seizures and convulse. And Jesus cast out the demon, healed the boy and gave him back to his father. And then, the usual Transfiguration sermon is something along the lines of, “Mountaintop experiences are nice, as far as they go; but the real work is down on the plain, among the people.

Now, I never know why one thing or another catches my attention when I am reading and preparing for sermons, but this time, what caught my attention about all the texts was the theme of God’s glory, God’s greatness. In the text from Exodus, being in the presence of God was so powerful that it somehow rubbed off onto Moses, whose face shined because of it. In Psalm 99, and many other psalms for that matter, people tremble and fall down before this great God. In 2 Corinthians, Paul talks of the glory of the Lord that is revealed in Christ Jesus. And, then in Luke, we see Jesus himself, in a dazzling white glory and a cloud and a voice, and the disciples are terrified. This is followed by the story of the healing, which includes that last little verse, “And all were astounded at the greatness of God.”

I went to take a closer look at those two words, glory and greatness, to see if maybe they were the same word in Greek, just translated differently in English. What I found was that the word for the “glory” of Jesus’ transfiguration is the word “doxa” which is a very ordinary word for glory, related to doxology. But the word for greatness is “megaleiotes” which is actually an uncommon word, that would be better translated as “majesty” or “magnificence.” “Greatness” is kind of wimpy. So, in the first event, this mountaintop experience they see doxa, glory, but in the second event, the healing, they see megaleiotes. To which some might say, So??

Well, for one thing, I think this changes how we can see what happens back down off the mountain, how we see what God is doing among the people, I think it changes where we look to see God’s glory. Usually when we think of God’s glory we might think of the occasional mountaintop experience, or we might think of the beauty of creation, all those calendar photos of trees and oceans and sunsets. This text suggests that the real place we see God’s glory is in healing.

Trees and canyons are nice, and ecstatic visions have their place, but God's best stuff is changing people's lives, casting out their demons, restoring them to wholeness. Other places God's best stuff is described as making the lame walk, the blind to see, bringing release to the captives and proclaiming good news to the poor. It is among real people, in real lives. It's not in faraway places or grandiose settings. God does God's best stuff on the streets, in the hospital rooms, in homes, and yes, even occasionally in the church pew. Everywhere where God is changing hearts and healing hurts – there is where we see God's true majesty.

The second implication of this text then is that it has the potential to change how we see our role in the stuff that God does down off the mountaintop, among the people. Whenever and wherever we are part of God's touching someone's life and healing their hurts, we are part of God's majesty. Paul, in his letter to the Corinthians, a few verses after the place we stopped in our lesson for the day, talks about how they, as Christians, have a treasure in clay jars. That is to say that they are the earthen vessels through which God's power is at work in the world, proclaiming Christ Jesus and the life-changing power of his forgiveness and love.

All that is still true, we now are the clay jars through which God is at work. And we never know just when that is happening. We never know when God is doing some magnificent thing. It might be a casual conversation that includes an invitation to attend worship. It might be one of the many acts of social outreach, it might be a warm welcome during the passing of the peace. God is the One doing the magnificent thing, we are simply the earthen vessel through which God is working. Those things all seem so simple, we might wonder if they really matter. Oh, yes, yes they do.

And lastly then, I think this understanding of where God's majesty really shows up changes how we talk about how God has acted in our lives, how God has healed our hurts, and made us whole. I imagine that the father of the boy who was healed spent the rest of his life telling this story of what Jesus did for his son. I imagine that the onlookers told everyone they knew, how in Jesus, God did an amazing thing. They were the people who brought friends and neighbors to swell the crowds wherever Jesus went.

And we have that same privilege, to share our stories, to invite others to come and see what God is up to in the world. We can open the door to someone else who God is hoping to heal or make whole. And, before you try to let yourself off the hook by thinking that you don't have any big amazing transformation story to tell, I think you should remember, it doesn't have to be dramatic. Not everybody has that kind of story to tell.

I bet that even the people who were the parents of the children Jesus blessed went around telling how important that had been to them. That was a little bit of God's majesty touching their life.

God is still at it. God's best stuff is still the healing the world, one person at a time. We have a role to play, a privilege, a purpose. May God use us, simple, sometimes sinful, earthen vessels to pour out God's majesty into our world. Amen