



SERMONS THAT WORK

Last Sunday in Epiphany (A)

Glory and Theophany

[RCL] Exodus 24:12-18; Psalm 2 or Psalm 99; 2 Peter 1:16-21; Matthew 17:1-9

On this last Sunday of the Epiphany season, we are struck by glimpses of glory emanating from two occasions of theophany found in today's lectionary. As with the heat and light of the sun, we know its effects, but we can't get too close to it because we couldn't bear it.

Let us first examine these two crucial words—glory and theophany. We glorify God's Holy Name when we offer praises, but do we ever stop to think about what this word means? It's a beautiful word, one that should be reserved for the Divine, but we also have heard it used for human kings and queens. If we look at the ancient roots of the word in Greek, they reveal that glory resides in knowledge, in knowing the one we are praising. This is crucial to the understanding of today's lectionary.

Theophany is closely related to Epiphany; in fact, the Greek church calls this season of Epiphany, Theophany—the revealing, the appearance of God. Let's keep these meanings in mind as we examine our scriptural passages.

In the Old Testament lesson, one of the most profound and significant in the story of Exodus, we see Moses entering and then disappearing into the cloud of glory and theophany. Even though the writing uses anthropomorphic language to describe God's actions, as in "Come up to me on the mountain, and wait there; and I will give you the tablets of stone, with the law and the commandment, which I have written for their instruction," the awesome quality of the experience remains hidden in the cloud. The presence of cloud and fire denotes God's presence, but we know that the human beings involved cannot see God because if they do, they shall die. "The glory of the Lord settled on Mount Sinai, and the cloud covered it for six days.... Now the appearance of the glory of the Lord was like a devouring fire on the top of the mountain."

Inside the cloud, Moses learns something of God's character as outlined in the commandments, and in the theophany he is privileged to glimpse, he is covered by God's glory. The writer of the passage doesn't tell us what Moses is seeing and what he is feeling. Devouring fire is terrifying; there is nothing mild, sweet, and comforting about theophany. The ancient Hebrew writers teach us this reality with their carefully chosen language about the Divine. By contrast, how careless we have become in speaking about God. How

often we hear our contemporaries taking the Lord's name in vain, and we don't even protest. We should tremble when making glib comments such as, "God told me to do this." How dare we? The Old Testament lesson today should leave us with the appropriate awe—the fear and trembling that result when we are confronted with God's glory. The ancient Hebrew writers did use anthropomorphic language for their God, but they never forgot that theophany was beyond human language and comprehension.

The beautiful and terrifying Psalm 2 has been appropriated by Christians who attribute the words meant for a human king to Jesus of Nazareth. This was inevitable because of the familiar words echoed in the baptism of Jesus and in the preaching of St. Paul: "You are my Son; this day I have begotten you." Yet, we must not forget that the psalm was written for the enthronement of a king at a time when kings were God's chosen leaders of the people. Later, this conviction changes into the hope for a kingly Messiah. You notice in this psalm a militant, punishing, and vengeful tone which Jesus, in his life and death, utterly rejected.

In the New Testament, the letter attributed to St. Peter recalls the Gospel lesson, so we will concentrate on the event the Church has called the Transfiguration of Jesus. The story of this metamorphosis maybe should be called "Seeing the Glory in Jesus," for this is what happened when three fishermen from Galilee were given a glimpse of who their friend Jesus truly was; the amazing thing is that they forgot it almost immediately afterward – until much later.

This story is found in all three of the Synoptic Gospels, but here we have St. Matthew's version. It's obvious that both Matthew and Luke learned the story from Mark, who must have heard it firsthand from his uncle Peter. One can imagine Peter telling Mark of those moments of glory and of terror. "And there I was," he must have told him, "babbling, not knowing what I was saying. I was only sure that something wondrous was before our eyes, that I didn't want it to end, that everything else in life suddenly did not matter, and I begged Jesus to let me build a hut for him, for Elijah, and for Moses. What was I thinking? I was not. I was struck by Light and Glory and had lost my senses."

What else was possible? Six days before, according to Matthew's timeline, Peter, inspired by the Holy Spirit, had declared that Jesus was the Anointed One, the Son of the Living God. Now Peter, together with James and John, accompanies Jesus, who is taking the three of them on a hike up the mountain, probably Mount Hermon. The hike must have taken all day. Luke, who paid attention to details, adds that the three disciples were heavy with sleep, so night must have fallen, and he also adds that Jesus was praying when the glory descended upon him. The three disciples are used to seeing Jesus praying. They know, without even being told, that this is the way he is always replenished, his powers restored, his exhaustion lifted— when he prays to his Father. But this time, something changes drastically while he is praying. His face is transformed by blinding light and his worn, dusty robe is turned into brilliance. He is no longer alone but in conversation with two other beings. How do they know the two are Elijah and Moses? We are not told. Will they remember this moment of glory later when they watch their teacher and friend in the agony of the Garden in Gethsemane? Will Peter remember as he denies Jesus in the yard of the one who will condemn his dearest friend?

No. Human beings forget God's glory and God's light when they are confronted with sin and darkness. One moment we are crying in delight, "Let's stay like this forever," and the next, we are sure that the Light never shone upon us. It becomes so easy to blame God for all the ills of humanity. When Moses returns from the glory of his mountain, he is confronted with the perfidy of the people who have fashioned an idol. When Jesus returns to Jerusalem he is confronted with condemnation by the people he had loved and abandonment by his friends.

What does this say about us? Whose children are we? Of darkness or of the light? God gave us the great gift of memory, and these biblical stories help us to remember always that knowing God means knowing God's glory. The dramatic stories of Moses on the mountain, of Jesus as he is transformed, of Paul as he is met by the glorified Christ and changes forever—these are our heritage. But the glory does not end there. We see it in the extravagant beauty of Nature; in the unconditional love of our pets; in the first smile of a baby; in the kindness shown from one person to another; in the hymns we sing, and in the Holy Eucharist we partake. We see it in the life of Jesus and in the lives of his disciples. We see the suffering and the pain also, but every now and then, there is that cloud of the Holy Presence and the Light of God's assurance—that we are loved despite our forgetfulness.

Above all, we remember that Theophany did happen in the Incarnation and the Resurrection of Jesus. We hold on to that knowledge. We are not abandoned. Christ has died. Christ is risen. Christ will come again.

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