

A Sermon
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Grace Baptist Church
Bryans Road, Maryland
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The Glory of God

Exodus 34:29-35

As soon as Moses made it down to the base of Mount Sinai, where the Israelites were waiting for him, he checked his Fitbit to see how many steps he had walked. Though all those trips up and down the mountain were primarily for the spiritual health of God's people, Moses himself was also benefiting from an improved heart rate and more calories burned. He didn't have some of the options that modern day travelers to the Holy Land can use. Nowadays, pilgrims and tourists can choose from two different routes to the top of Mount Sinai. One trek takes you most of the way on camel, with the final 750 steps on foot. The other, a more direct route, involves climbing 3,750 steps and is sometime called "God's Stairmaster."

Moses had neither of these options. But from what today's text tells us, any wear and tear that Moses experienced was virtually unnoticeable because of his radiance. According to our Scripture passage, Moses' face "was radiant because he had spoken with the Lord" (v. 29). This was the kind of radiance that came from entering in a unique and deep way into the presence of God. The Hebrew word translated as "shine" or "radiant" is sometimes used to refer to "horns." In fact, a Latin version of the Bible called the Vulgate used the word that means "horns." So in some medieval and modern art, Moses is actually portrayed with horns. In the sixteenth century, Michelangelo sculpted a famous statue that includes horns coming out of Moses' head. Despite this tradition, the notion of shining or radiance is still probably the best way to interpret what happened to Moses in this story.

Keep in mind that this is the second time Moses has come down the mountain with the Lord's commandments in hand. The first time Moses shattered them in reaction to the people's idolatrous behavior with the golden calf. Now Moses returns after encountering the Lord in a way that no one else ever had. When he was up there on the mountain, Moses asked to see God's glory, and God agreed. He put Moses in the cleft of a rock and passed by, so that Moses was only able to see God's back. After all, no one could look upon God's face and live.

Novelist H. G. Wells was certainly no advocate for the Christian faith, but he once wrote a short story called "Answer to Prayer," in which an archbishop has begun to suffer anxiety and distress because of his friends' and colleagues' wavering respect for him. The archbishop even begins to doubt the authenticity of his relationship with God. Normally, when others found themselves in similar situations, the archbishop was accustomed to recommending prayer. But he himself has been lax in that area of his life and ministry, and hasn't felt the presence of God in a long time. So he goes to the cathedral, slowly sinks to his knees, and begins to pray. Wells writes:

"Oh God," he began, and paused.

He paused, and a sense of awful imminence, a monstrous awe, gripped him. And then he heard a voice.

It was not a harsh voice, but it was a clear, strong voice. There was nothing about it still or small. It was neither friendly nor hostile; it was brisk.

"Yes," said the voice. "*What is it?*"¹

When worshipers arrived the next morning, they found the Archbishop dead, sprawled on the crimson carpet. When they turned him over, the look on his face wasn't the usual one of serenity, but of fear.

Wells' story reminds us that we dare not take lightly the act of entering into the presence of God. No matter how accustomed we are to being in the Lord's house on Sunday, or to seeking his presence on a daily basis, we shouldn't become casual about the awesomeness, the holiness, and the splendor of God. God isn't some manageable deity who's on call 24/7/365 in order to do our bidding. He doesn't exist primarily to bless us but rather that we should bless him, and praise his holy name. He's the God described in 1 Timothy as "the blessed and only Ruler, the King of kings and Lord of lords, who alone is immortal and who lives in unapproachable light, whom no one has seen or can see. To him be honor and might forever. Amen" (6:16).

At the same time, we also say "Amen" to the confession that the heavenly, holy, mystery of God has come into the realm of human life. One of the Bible's primary ways of talking about this entry of the heavenly into the earthly is through the language of "glory." Though the terminology itself doesn't appear in today's text from Exodus, the story of Moses' encounters with God and his trips up and down the mountain is suffused with the concept of God's glory.

The glory of God. We ourselves sing about it. "Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Ghost; As it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be, world without end. Amen, Amen." We also pray about God's glory. "For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory, forever and ever. Amen." And we preach about God's glory. "There is no difference, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, . ." (Rom. 3:22b-23). As with the story of Israel, so with the story of the church. Our congregational life is saturated with talk of God's glory.

And therein lies the danger. We get so accustomed to singing, praying, and preaching about God's glory that we take it for granted. We lose sight of the fact that it's no minor matter to come here and enter together into the presence of a holy and mysterious God. It was certainly no minor matter for Moses. In fact, it left him changed. As one preacher has put it, "Moses saw God's back, and it was such a strong dose of glory that some of it rubbed off on him."² When he came back down the mountain, Moses wasn't even aware that his face was shining. But the people certainly noticed it. They kept a safe distance, fearing that such light might spell doom for them. But Moses motioned for them to come closer. First Aaron and the leaders approached, and then the rest of the people. This time Moses succeeded in delivering the commandments to them. God's glory was more than just light. It was also God's words.

All of our speaking about God's glory is really a response to God's speaking. Speaking to Moses. Speaking to his people. Speaking to us. Speaking most fully and decisively through Jesus Christ. In today's Scripture reading from Luke, Peter, John, and James go up a mountain with Jesus, who starts to shine in dazzling glory. Moses himself even makes an appearance, in glorious splendor. Once again, there's light. But more than light. Words. Words coming out of the cloud saying, "This is my Son, whom I have chosen; listen to him" (9:35).

When we gather for worship, our ears help us see. They help us glimpse the glory of God in Christ. Jesus is the one in whom and through whom the glory of God, the presence of God, comes to earth, and dwells with us stiff-necked and resistant people who often seek after other gods whose glory is false and fading. But by listening to what God is saying to us in Jesus, our eyes are opened to true and lasting glory.

The thing is, God's glory revealed in Jesus doesn't necessarily conform to what we often think of as glorious. In one of his books, Max Lucado talks about how God revealed himself in Jesus. He writes:

I think it's noteworthy that the Almighty didn't act high and mighty. The Holy One wasn't holier than thou. The one who knew it all, wasn't a know it all. The one who made the stars didn't keep his head in them. The one who owns all the stuff of earth never strutted it. Never. He could have. Oh, how he could have. He could have been a name-dropper. Hey, did I ever tell you of a time when Moses and I went up on the mountain. He could have been a showoff. Want me to beam you into the 20th century? He could have been a smart alec. I know what you are thinking, want me to prove it? He could have been highbrow and uppity. I've got some property on Jupiter. Jesus could have been all of these things, but he wasn't. His purpose was not to show off, but to show up.³

Jesus was God's ultimate and decisive way of showing up, which means that salvation isn't about how we ascend but about how God descends. God doesn't wait for us to make it to the summit, but comes down to where we're standing at the base, in need of redemption and renewal.

Remember that in today's Scripture reading from Luke, the transfiguration of Jesus isn't the climax of the story. Being on the mountaintop, in the presence of divine glory, is great. In fact, Peter, speaking for all the disciples, wants to construct shelters so that they can stop time and live in the radiance of that moment. But there's way more to Luke's narrative, and way more to being the Messiah, than simply pulling back the veil to give others a glimpse of heaven's light. The story goes on. And Jesus goes on. And where Jesus is going requires descending the mountain and entering deeper into his approaching suffering and death.

I think of our hymn, "Heaven Came Down." The music and words try to convey the transformation that Jesus brings into a believer's life. When we reach the chorus, we sing: "Heaven came down and glory filled my soul, . . ." And where did this glory descend? "When at the cross the Savior made me whole." So the death of Jesus is where we see the glory of God most fully and decisively revealed. In what looks to human eyes like the lowest point and the darkest place, God meets us with forgiveness and restoration.

So today we come back to the Lord's Table. We come to get another glimpse of glory. We come to be changed. We come to experience power greater than our own strength. We come to find guidance for the next steps in our path. We come to look for a ray of light in the midst of whatever dark situations we're facing. As we break the bread and share the cup, we remember how the mercy of God shines upon us in the cross of Christ.

¹ H. G. Wells, "Answer to Prayer." *The New Yorker* (May 1937).

² Barbara Brown Taylor, *Bread of Angels* (Cambridge: Cowley, 1997) 4.

³ I'm not sure which of Lucado's books this comes from. It's quoted by John Schmidt in his sermon, "God with a Human Face." Central Presbyterian Church, Baltimore, Maryland. December 24, 2003. January 10, 2008. <<http://www.centralpc.org/sermons/2003/s031224.htm>>.