

Also

Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

January 10, 2010

The Word became a human being and, full of grace and truth, lived among us ... and we saw his glory ...

This is the claim on which our faith is built, that the Word -- God's Word, God's way, truth, wisdom, grace, all that God wants to say to us creatures -- the Word became a human being. The Word became a human being, walking among us, embodying God's message to us, embodying God for us.

The Word became a human being and we can see. We can see God's glory! We can see God!

We saw his glory ...

That's the theme for my sermons during the season of Epiphany, the season that bridges the church calendar between Advent to Lent -- glory.

We saw his glory ...

What do we see when we look at Jesus? What is glory?

"Glory" is a word that fascinates me. It speaks to me of something awesome, stunningly beautiful, marvelous, extraordinary; something you would hesitate to touch, something from which you have to shield your eyes; something weighty, something momentous.

We saw his glory ...

It means Jesus is about something more than giving us a new message from God or showing us a new way of right living. It means when we look at Jesus we see, we touch, we experience ... "Godness." To see glory is to discover what is beyond, to go beyond everyday worries and pleasures, to come in contact with the deepest desires of our souls. It means catching a glimpse of something that leaves us speechless, that makes us fall to our knees, that makes us ... worship.

“Glory” is not a commonly used word. When was the last time you used it in everyday conversation? When we do use the word, it is usually in one of two contexts: sports or warfare. We speak of the glory of a great athlete or the glory of a valiant soldier.

In both cases, glory has to do with great accomplishment in an adversarial situation -- winning a contest, winning a battle, proving greater, mightier, better than an opponent, than an enemy. And in both cases, glory is won with the body. It is a physical, not a mental, accomplishment. The marks of glory are visible.

Is this what we mean when we speak of Jesus’ glory? When we speak of Jesus’ glory, we don’t have battles or contests in mind ... do we? We’re not talking about winning great victories or vanquishing formidable enemies ... are we? But glory is visible. It must be about something material, something physical, something we can see.

That’s our assignment for Epiphany, to think about what we do see when we look at Jesus, to try to describe glory. There may be some surprises along the way. In fact, we begin today with a surprise!

We begin our Epiphany journey in the gospel of Luke, with the words of John the Baptist. People were watching John, listening to John, getting excited by what they saw and heard. They even began to think he might be the long-awaited Messiah! But John said to all of them:

I baptize you with water, but someone is coming who is much greater than I am ...

“I baptize you with water, but ...”

“But.” It’s a word that separates, differentiates. This is what you have seen. This is what you are used to seeing. This is what is normal and expected and ordinary . But!

That’s what we would expect glory to be: something set apart from the rest, something over and above, something remarkable, something extra-ordinary. And we have already seen ample signs of that sort of glory in the gospel of Luke.

There is the announcement given to young Mary that she would give birth to a king, to one who would be called the Son of the Most High God!

There is Elizabeth's ecstatic greeting when she first saw the pregnant Mary:

You are the most blessed of all women, and blessed is the child you will bear!

There is the choir of angels singing the night of Jesus' birth:

Glory to God in the highest heaven!

There are the exclamations of old Anna and old Simeon when they caught a glimpse of the newborn Jesus as his parents brought him into the Temple:

With my own eyes I have seen your salvation!

There is the story of the twelve-year-old Jesus conversing with Jewish teachers in Jerusalem, impressing them with his wisdom.

All are signs pointing to one who is different, to one who is special, to one who is set apart from the rest.

But, in today's reading from Luke's gospel, the adult Jesus appears on the scene for the first time. Jesus enters the picture -- the Jesus announced to Mary, sung by the angels, awaited by faithful Jews, proclaimed by John. And what does he do? Watch!

After all the people had been baptized, Jesus also was baptized ...

"Also." After all the others did it, Jesus did it also, just like everybody else, along with everybody else. Not "but," but "also!" Not "but:" not set apart, not set above, not differentiated. "Also:" with, alongside, alike.

This is what you see when you look at Jesus: not someone up on a shelf, in the clouds, above it all, above you; but someone in the water ... with you!

Why was Jesus baptized? Have you ever noticed in the practice of your faith that a lot of "why" questions get left unanswered? Our faith tells us what is. Jesus was baptized. Jesus was baptized along with all the others. Jesus was baptized along with you. He joins you in this sign of dedication to God, in this act of obedience to God, in this gesture of humility before God, in this expression of desire for God.

And then God speaks:

You are my own dear Son ...

For whose benefit are those words spoken? For Jesus? For us? For both? God calls Jesus "dear." God calls Jesus "my own." But these words are spoken to Jesus in the act of joining himself to us!

Can it be then that God's words are meant for us ... also? Can it be that when we are baptized, along with Jesus, we too are dear, we too are God's own?

Can it be that this is the glory we see when we look at Jesus ... the glory of humility? The glory of brotherhood? The glory of companionship? The glory of the possibility of companionship ... with God?

"Also" means you matter. You matter to Jesus, and since you matter to Jesus, you matter to God. You are not alone. You are not left on your own. You are understood. You are appreciated. You are wanted. You are loved.

See it! Believe it! Take it personally, not generically! Jesus' baptism doesn't mean that people in general matter, but that you matter. You! Jesus is in the water with you, where you are, however you are, whatever you are.

This is the glory shown in Jesus' body, that the God who is creator of all that is, the God who is wise beyond all knowing, good beyond all telling, glorious beyond all imagining, embraces you where you are. Now. Today. Here. You.