

They saw his glory

Luke 9:28-36

February 14, 2010

When Peter and John and James went up the hill that day with Jesus, what did they see?

It had not been long, maybe only a matter of months, since they had spent their days washing and mending nets and marketing their catch after long nights of fishing. They had been living out their lives pretty much like all of us do, doing the things we do everyday: going to work, trying to make ends meet, keeping house, spending time with family and friends, going to weddings and funerals, sharing a laugh, complaining about the government.

All that changed on the day they met Jesus, on the day Jesus stepped into Peter's boat and used it for a pulpit, on the day Jesus told them to go fishing. They left everything that day -- boats and nets and fish and homes and livelihood and families. They left everything to go with him.

He astonished them that day, and he had astonished them many times since.

They saw the fish that strained their nets and overflowed their boats when he sent them back out onto the lake after a fish-less night.

They tasted the wine -- the finest of wines! -- that was drawn out of the jars he had the servants fill with water.

They heard him read from the book of the prophet Isaiah about the one chosen to bring good news to the poor, the one chosen to bring freedom to captives, the one chosen to announce the arrival of the day of the Lord's salvation, and they heard him say,

This passage of scripture has come true today, as you hear it being read ...

They watched him walk away from the edge of the cliff outside the town of Nazareth, walking away -- unchallenged, untouched -- through the angry crowd of people bent on doing away with him.

They saw his glory: the glory of the truth he spoke and lived; the glory of the grace he embodied and bestowed; the glory of the light and life he brought into this world. They saw his glory, glory similar in sense and meaning to the glories we name when we speak of a glorious victory or even a glorious defeat, the glory of cherry trees in full bloom or the glory of an act of selfless sacrifice,

the glory of a stirring speech or the glory of a sunrise -- something astonishing, marvelous, stunningly beautiful, something out of the ordinary, something well beyond the ordinary.

We use the word “glory” in an attempt to put words to what stretches the limits of sense and imagination. It is a metaphor, expressing our subjective response to an object or experience of astonishing beauty or surpassing goodness.

It is a metaphor.

When we say, “her face shone,” we don’t mean her face was literally emitting light rays. We are painting a word picture of the delight we read in her expression.

When we say of a team that loses a close game, “they fought gloriously to the very end,” we don’t mean their bodies were any different in appearance from the bodies of their opponents. We are painting a word picture of their courage and determination and commitment.

And when we say “Jesus is the light of the world,” or “the light shines in the darkness and the darkness has never put it out” or “we saw his glory,” we don’t mean that Jesus literally shines. We are painting a word picture of the compelling power of the truth he proclaims, a word picture of the healing power of the grace he brings into our lives, a word picture of the transforming power of his call to follow.

But when Peter and John and James went up the hill that day with Jesus, what did they see?

They saw his glory! They saw his face shining -- literally shining! They saw his clothes dazzling white -- literally dazzling! They saw glory -- real, substantial, palpable, visible glory.

It’s a hard thing to understand. It’s a hard thing to talk about. So much of what took place that day on that hilltop remains clouded in mystery -- what the disciples saw, what we may expect to see. But we can begin to try to understand what they saw by thinking about how we see.

We see reflected light. Light rays from some source of light are reflected off an object and enter our eyes and we see. Absent a source of light, the object may still be there, but we cannot see it. You cannot even see the hand in front of your face in pitch black darkness.

Most of the time, we are able to see what we see thanks to the sun, our primary source of light. Peter and John and James had often seen Jesus in the sunlight, but that day his appearance was transformed.

So what was different that day? Why did they see Jesus transfigured, shining in glory? Do you see? Do you understand? The source of light was not the sun! The source of the dazzling light they saw in the face of Jesus was ... God! As Jesus prayed, he came - literally -- into the presence of God, and he became transformed -- literally -- by the presence of God.

This is where the mystery deepens, because this light, the light that comes from God (may we say the light that is God?) not only shines on Jesus and is reflected by Jesus, it changes him, or reveals him, as he really is, as God made him to be. And deeper mystery still, you heard Paul testify that this same light, the glory of the Lord, will be reflected too in our faces, and will transform us!

So why is this important? Why retell this story? What do you think?

It means at least this. It means that what Jesus brings to us is more than a new model, a new teaching, a new example, a new lifestyle. It means that what Jesus offers us is more than direction, correction, motivation. It means that what Jesus is to us is more than metaphor.

Jesus is the light and Jesus brings light to us. Jesus brings God's light to us. Jesus brings God to us.

Jesus offers us intimacy, intimacy with God through him, intimacy with God like his, an intimacy so real, so palpable, so physical, that the glory of the Lord comes to shine on us and be reflected by us, if not now, if not yet, surely one day.

And it means the good things we now praise, the beautiful things we now call glorious, are only shadows of the real thing, dim images of what we shall see:

What we see now is like a dim image in a mirror; then we shall see face-to-face ...

But that day they saw it. They didn't tell anybody about it, but they saw it. They didn't understand it, but they saw it. They saw his glory, the glory of God's chosen One, the glory of God's dear Son, the glory that they -- and we -- are invited to share!