

Has there ever been a time when you have unmistakably felt the presence of God? Think back to that moment. What were you doing? Who was with you? Were you at worship? In nature, watching a storm or a sunset? Witnessing the birth of a child?

What did God's presence in that moment feel like? Was it a sensation of warmth? Of lightness? Of peace? Where did you feel it? Your head? Your chest? Your fingertips?

How did you respond? Did you laugh? Cry? Gasp? Sing?

If you've never had a moment like that, have you ever wished for one? Have you ever prayed for one? Have you ever heard people's stories of their own moments and felt grief or shame or jealousy at not having your own? What would you give to have a moment like that, when just for just a few, fleeting seconds, you could know that God is real and present and at your side?

The story we get today from Luke's gospel is the quintessential story of one of those moments. That feeling of God's intimate presence, the feeling that defies description or explanation, is what I imagine is intended by the apostles and evangelists and prophets when they use the word "glory." The glory of God, the tangible presence of God that saturates everything, that's what I hear St. Luke struggling to describe as he narrates the changes to Jesus' face and clothing and the cloud overshadowing the mountaintop and the prophets appearing at his side.

But this moment, like all moments, must come to an end. It's when Moses and Elijah turn to leave that Peter breaks his silence and offers a suggestion for how this moment could go on forever. Who can blame him? Who among us, in the same situation, would be glad to see such a moment fade away, to trudge down the mountain and back to the daily grind of life? It's hard enough to let go of these moments when they find us in sunsets and hymns, but to say goodbye to Moses and Elijah?

And yet, we are left with the distinct impression that Peter's suggestion—to live forever in the glory of that moment—is somehow wrong; bad, even. Luke almost defends him: "Please forgive him," the evangelist pleads with us, "he didn't know what he was saying." We are almost given to read the response from the cloud as a rebuke to Peter's ecstatic hope. "*This* is my Son, *listen* to him." Is Peter wrong to want to experience the glory of God for just a little longer? Is it bad that he wants to live in the heaven of God's presence on that mountain?

The season of Epiphany is all about the revelation of God's glory in the person of God's Son. Each of the stories of this season are little glimpses through the veil into the glory that Jesus embodies and has come to share. The voice at the baptism speaks unconditional love and

acceptance; the miraculous abundance of wine in Cana and fish in Capernaum hint at the wild bounty and joy of God's kingdom, a bounty that Jesus himself proclaims in his sermon at Nazareth and again in the Sermon on the Plain. Jesus is a thin space between God's kingdom and ours, a place where the glory of God shines through like the sunlight piercing the shadow of a darkened room. On this mountain, for just a moment, that thin space becomes a gap, and God's blinding presence pours through.

This is the glory that brings us all here. Just like those first disciples left their nets and followed after witnessing that glory at work in Jesus, so we gather here, week after week, month after month, year after year, even when gathering means sitting in front of a television or computer screen. We gather hoping, wishing, waiting, thirsting for just a glimpse of a hint of a crumb of that kind of glory. Can any of us really fault Peter for trying to hold onto what we're all hoping to find?

But when we start equating God's glory with God Himself, when we start to believe that God's glory indicates God's presence, then it becomes easy for us to think that the lack of glory means that God is absent. That may perhaps be the reason that Moses veiled his face after coming down from Sinai: he suggests that Moses veiled himself so that the people wouldn't be able to see God's glory fade from his face; that they could continue to imagine that, behind that veil, Moses' face shone continually. Even Paul himself seems to think that, since Moses' glory faded away over time, the law he brought down on stone tablets also has somehow lost its power. When the glory fades, where is God to be found?

The answer to that question is found back on the mountain, where Jesus met Moses and Elijah. St. Luke says that Jesus spoke to them about his departure, which he was about to accomplish at Jerusalem. That word "departure" in Greek is *exodus*, as in the Exodus that Moses led from Egypt. Elijah, too, had his own memorable departure involving a whirlwind and chariots of fire. Sometimes, the departure of glory is where God is. Sometimes, God is found in the letting go, the leaving, even the dying.

Martin Luther wrote that the theologian of glory—that is, the person who sees God at work in the glorious, beautiful, lovely things—calls the evil thing good and the good thing evil. Standing in contrast to the theologian of glory, he says, is the theologian of the cross, who "calls things what they are." For a long time, I figured that this meant that the theologian of glory was mixed up, seeing as good things that were actually evil, and vice versa. I wondered if that meant those glorious moments—moments like the Transfiguration—were actually evil; if instead, the

crucifixion moments—the moments when God seems so painfully absent—if those were not, in fact, the actual “good things.” In other words, I wondered if he meant that God was not present in the expected places, but actually present in the hard things like suffering and pain and death.

But then, with a little help from St. John of the Cross, I began to see things differently. St. John reminded me that any experience we have of God’s presence—from the warmth that fills one’s heart when performing an act of kindness to the sudden ecstasy of a Transfiguration moment—those feelings are not God. Those feelings are finite, with a definite beginning and ending, different from other feelings. I experience those feelings through my limited senses with my finite body. My finitude can never experience the fullness of God, because God is infinite.

I wonder now if what Luther meant was that theologians of glory are always trying to label things as either good or evil, and that when we do that, we always get it wrong. Theologians of the cross, on the other hand, know that all things—ourselves included—are both good *and* evil—or, as Luther himself said, both “sinner and saint”—and that God, being infinite, is in all things. Was Peter right or wrong in what he said? Was his desire to remain in that moment good or evil? Should we imitate him, or condemn him? The theologian of the cross doesn’t bother with such questions; but knowing that God is in all things, they simply ask where God is in this story.

So where is God in this story? Certainly, God is in the dazzling clothes, the luminous cloud, the thundering voice, the congregation of great prophets; but God is also in the fading of that glory, in the coming down off the mountain and healing the boy, in the journey to Jerusalem and the cross. God is in the departing and the dying as much as in the living.

It is no accident that this Feast of the Transfiguration always comes just before Ash Wednesday. The Transfiguration shines the light of God’s glory on this one simple fact: that the Son of Man is going to be betrayed into human hands. From the shining mountaintop, we look across to the crest of the hill of Calvary. And that is also where God is.

Particularly as we gather together today as Agnus Dei Lutheran Church to prepare ourselves for a very important meeting by worshiping together, I think we should let these words sink into our ears. We are about to engage deep questions about how we should move forward as a congregation in a time of, frankly, great uncertainty and difficulty. We are not on a mountaintop today. Today, we walk through a dark valley, overshadowed by the stress of pandemic and the concern for our future as a congregation. We are asking ourselves what is the correct way to

proceed, what is the best way forward. But you know what? I don't think that's the right question. I don't think that's a question that theologians of the cross would ask.

Instead, I wonder if the question we should ask ourselves—the only question that really matters—is where is God in this story, our story? The lack of glory in these days has us practically frantic as we search for a way back up the mountain. But what if God is in this valley, too? What if the cloud we're in is the cloud of God's presence? What if that thunder isn't just thunder, but the voice of God? What is that voice telling us? What if this leg of our journey isn't just something we have to get through, but a moment filled with the grace and glory of God?

There's a reason we walk straight down the mountain every year into Ash Wednesday, a reason why the story of the Transfiguration is always bookended by predictions of Jesus' Passion. Both are experiences of God's glory; one fades into the next. In fact, maybe this continual fading *is* God's glory, and as St. Paul writes, as we look upon that glory, we are being transformed into it—into the image of God—fading from one degree of glory into another. One has to fade away for the next to come.

As we gather today, both for worship and for business, we are called to let go of what was so that we may receive what will be. What is fading and what is coming, that is the question for us to ponder. Regardless of how we answer that question, we remember that we are walking with Christ, God's Chosen, who shows us the glory of God both on this mountaintop and the hill outside of Jerusalem. The glory of God is already among us.