

Encountering God's Glory  
The Rev. Amy Spagna  
March 2, 2025 – Last Epiphany  
Luke 9:28-36

What image does the word *glory* bring up for you? Is it an Olympic athlete, wrapped in their nation's flag, and soaking in the applause of the crowd after winning a gold medal? Is it the pomp and circumstance of soldiers returning from a victorious campaign? Is it the echo of the final chord of a piece of music? Or is it something else?

This season of Epiphany is meant to remind us that all these things pale in comparison to God's glory when it is experienced in its fullness. It is instead more like what Luke describes: Jesus, shining like the sun and standing with his prophetic forerunners on the top of the mountain, and in God's very presence. Michael Ramsey, who served as Archbishop of Canterbury during the upheaval of the 1960s and 1970s, noted that, "Insofar as [glory] means the power and character of God, the key to that power and character is found in what God has done... Insofar as [glory] is the divine splendour, Jesus Christ is that splendour."<sup>1</sup>

It is God's splendor which is fully on display in the event we have since come to call the Transfiguration. As far as events in the life of Jesus go, this one is pretty important. Three of the four gospels describe it in nearly identical detail, and even has its own day set aside on the liturgical calendar on August 6. It's a rich text to preach on. One could emphasize Peter getting tongue-tied; or humans experiencing firsthand the presence of God; or Moses and Elijah as signs of coming divine judgment, and their

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<sup>1</sup> Michael Ramsey, "Glory in the New Testament." In *Glory Descending: Michael Ramsey and His Writings* by Douglas Dales, John Habgood, Geoffrey Rowell, and Rowan Williams (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf and Stock, 2018), 69.

conversation with Jesus about his impending exit. I want instead to fly over all of these things and look at the bigger picture here, and that's the question of how this display of glory is part of the answer to the question of who Jesus really is.

Jesus' identity is the central issue in this 9<sup>th</sup> chapter. Luke begins it by describing how there was already so much public conversation about Jesus that even King Herod was asking questions: "... [he] heard about all that had taken place and he was perplexed, because it was said by some that John had been raised from the dead, by some that Elijah had appeared, and by others that one of the ancient prophets had arisen. Herod said, 'John, I beheaded; but who is this about whom I hear such things?'" (Lk 9:7-9a, NRSV). Luke follows that up with Peter's confession that Jesus is the Messiah, and the first prediction of Jesus' coming demise. When we get to the Transfiguration itself, which is at the rhetorical center of this chapter, we are meant to understand it as the "and" in the idea that the messiah must both suffer a horrible death AND fit into God's larger plans for human salvation. This "and" also serves to highlight Jesus' unique and direct connection to God – and that it is far deeper of a connection than the sleepy Peter, James, and John had suspected until that moment, when they get a passing glimpse of God's glory for themselves.<sup>2</sup>

There are two keys to this scene are prayer and glory.

First, prayer: what do we know about it in this particular context?

It's the reason why Jesus took Peter, James, and John up to the mountain to begin with. Prayer is also a hallmark of Jesus' relationship with God. It's something Jesus does regularly. He goes away somewhere to talk to God, often at critical

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<sup>2</sup> Andrew McGowan, "Exodus: The Transfiguration in Luke." <https://abcmcg.substack.com/p/exodus-the-transfiguration-in-luke> [accessed February 25, 2025].

moments in the story, and for the same reasons that you and I do. It is there that the relationship and trust between us and God are built. In the gospels, prayer is very often where God reveals Godself, or enables a particular action or event to take place. The Transfiguration is no exception to this. Here, Jesus has settled himself into a place where he can receive what God will tell him – and in this case, where the people around him will be able to receive that revelation in its fulness (Peter's confused babbling notwithstanding!).

Prayer enables the experience of God's glory. Broadly defined, glory is : "a state of great splendor, magnificence, or prosperity;" or "the splendor and bliss of heaven." That's what's on full display here. It invites awe, and reverence, as we get to experience this visible aspect of God's holiness and majesty.<sup>3</sup> Seeing someone, or something, to a Greek speaker in antiquity meant knowing them. That is, to some extent, what Peter, James, and John take down the mountain with them from this experience. They now know who Jesus is, although perhaps without the added dimensions of his death and resurrection. They have seen, and thus know, that God is up to something extraordinary, but it is not something they quite understand fully just yet – and will not, until the Holy Spirit blows into their room on Pentecost and enables them to go and tell everyone else about what they'd seen and heard.

As Archbishop Ramsey framed it, the Transfiguration is the entry point to seeing the "... Christian mystery... in its unity. Here we perceive that the living and the dead are one in Christ, that the old covenant and the new are inseparable, that the Cross and

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<sup>3</sup> Sarah Henrich, "Commentary on Luke 9:28-36 [27-43a]." <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revise-common-lectionary/transfiguration-of-our-lord-3/commentary-on-luke-928-36-37-43-5> [accessed February 24, 2025].

the glory are one, that the age to come is already here, that our human nature has a destiny of glory, that in Christ the final Word is uttered, and in him alone the Father is well-pleased... Such a gospel transcends the world and yet speaks directly to the immediate here-and-now. He who is transfigured is the Son of Man; and as he discloses on the holy mountain another world, he reveals that no part of created things, and no moment of created time lies outside the power of the Spirit, who is the Lord, to change it from glory into glory."<sup>4</sup>

Let us keep this marker of Jesus' identity in mind as the end goal for what is to come. As we head off into the ashy penitence of Lent on Wednesday, let us remember that it is this is what awaits us at the end: a display of God's glory such as the world had never seen. It transcends everything: time, space, the politics of the moment we occupy in history. Even as it seems that the world is crashing down around us – just as it did for Peter, James, and John – this is something we can hang on to. It is the reminder that God can, and will, show up in places and in ways we don't expect. That appearance will, in turn, enable us to come down from whatever mountaintop on which we happen to be sitting, and to do the hard work of showing others what it means to love our neighbors as Jesus taught us.

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<sup>4</sup> Michael Ramsey, "The Gospel of the Transfiguration." In *Glory Descending: Michael Ramsey and His Writings* by Douglas Dales, John Habgood, Geoffrey Rowell, and Rowan Williams (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf and Stock, 2018), 84-86.