

Preaching from St. Stephen's Pulpit

St. Stephen Lutheran Church, Williamsburg, VA

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God's Weighty Glory

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Beloved by God, my siblings in Christ; grace to you and peace from God our Creator and our Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

What do you think of when you hear the word glory? Radiance? Dazzling light? Kingship? Power? Gold? Riches? This is a tricky word! And it's at the heart of a lot of our narrative today. What does it mean that Jesus, Moses, and Elijah "appeared in glory"¹? Or that Peter and the others saw Jesus' "glory" when they awoke? What about the radiance of Moses' face? Was that a part of God's glory? Our psalm seems to describe the glorious acts of God. And then there's Paul's letter to the Corinthians, full of glory language!

Let's take a look at this key concept then. In Greek the word used is δόξα (*doxa*) which "primarily refers to the glory and majesty of God."² You might recognize it from the churchy word, doxology, which is a song of praise (giving God glory). Fairly straightforward, and it falls in line with a lot of the modern understanding of glory.

If we take into account the historical and cultural realities of the time, we should also examine the word in Hebrew to gain some insight into how Paul and the author of Luke would have understood the word. In Hebrew the word most commonly used for glory is כְּבוֹד (*kavod*), which signifies "weightiness or importance, often in the context of God's manifest presence."³

Glory, then, isn't just about reputation or honor. Rather, glory is something that knocks you flat on your back with its importance or weightiness. Glory is

¹ Luke 9:31a (NRSVUE)

² Strong's Concordance

³ Ibid.

when you find yourself holding your breath at the beauty of creation around you. Glory is when a word or song lyric opens up a grief in you that you had forgotten was there, but you need to address. Glory is the unexpectedly kind act of a stranger when you are in need. Glory is when the son of God confronts you in a vision on the way to Damascus, causing you to fall to the ground and forever changing the trajectory of your life.⁴

Paul knows the glory of God. And he seems to understand that it is the sort of glory that humanity almost must respond to. The sort of experience that will change our lives, if we let it. Peter knows this glory too, though he seems to miss it in our Gospel reading today.

Peter has already experienced the glory of God in some profound ways. But let's go back to his first experience of that glory. It was just a few weeks ago that we heard the call story of Peter, James and John. In Luke 5 we hear how after preaching from his boat, Jesus orders Peter and the others to let down their nets. They are then overwhelmed by fish, but more importantly, they are overwhelmed by God's glory! The text even tells us that "When Simon Peter saw this, he **fell** at Jesus' knees..."⁵ This experience, much like Paul's, will forever change the trajectory of Peter's life.

But oddly enough Peter seems to backslide a bit in his understanding of glory in our Gospel text today. "Just as they were leaving him, Peter said to Jesus, 'Master, it is good for us to be here; let us set up three tents, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah,' **not realizing what he was saying.**"⁶ Why does the author point out Peter's ignorance? Why include that extra phrase, "not realizing what he was saying."

Peter, in my mind, is an everyman. Among the disciples he represents humanity in a very realistic and powerful way. He is constantly putting his foot in his mouth and can be prone to action without thought. Seems like a fair representation of most of humanity!

⁴ Acts 9

⁵ Luke 5:8a (emphasis mine)

⁶ Luke 9:33 (emphasis mine)

Peter experiences the glory of God in this scene, but seemingly not it's full weight. Instead Peter gets distracted by the human understanding of glory. He wants to distort it. Let's set up a monument here to mark this glorious occasion he proffers. He wants to hold onto the glory, stay on the mountain top. He's caught up in the glory, instead of feeling the weight of it.

This is a dangerous temptation for us today too! We are prone to distorting the glory of God to our own purposes. It's such a problem that there's even a commandment about it. What else do you think "You shall not misuse the name of the Lord your God"⁷ means? It means don't apply God's name (and God's power and glory) to human agendas and priorities. Do not subvert or distort God's weighty, life-changing glory!

The rise of the heresy of Christian Nationalism today is a real and obvious example of the distortion of God's glory. That dangerous movement conflates God's glory with political and military power. Following Bishop Budde's sermon, a Utah deacon named Ben Garrett tweeted that she had committed the "sin of empathy," whatever that's supposed to be. Members of the of the New Apostolic Reformation, a religious group with no qualms about promoting partisan politics, called for "the defeat of spiritual enemies and the taking back of territory for the glory of God."

That sort of call and action is drastically different from the glory of God described in the Gospels. The weighty glory of God seems far more interested in restoring people to wholeness and relationship than defeating people and gaining territory. The weighty glory of God that I understand calls me to change my life for the sake of the world's wholeness and peace.

Peter got glory wrong, at least in this instance. Paul understood it at times, though he struggled with it too. Moses veiled his face because the people couldn't stand to see God's glory after they built a golden calf. The Christian Nationalists don't understand it either.

⁷ Exodus 20:7a

You know who does feel the weight of God's glory in the Transfiguration text? The man who called out for help. God's glory exorcised the demon from his only son. God's glory completely changed the trajectory of his life, restoring his son to wholeness and community. This is the glory we are called to value and emulate. The glory of God that causes healing, reconciliation, and wholeness. The sort of glory that most politicians and nationalists hide from. That's the weighty glory of God. Amen.