

"A Glimpse of God"

Neil Engle
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Text: Matthew 17:1-9

First Christian Church
115 Courthouse Plaza
Manhattan, Kansas 66502

It all began ordinary enough. Jesus and His inner circle – Peter, James, and John – went up on a high mountain by themselves. Perhaps Jesus needed some confirmation that His decision to go to Jerusalem was correct. As we look at the life of Jesus, we see that there are many turning points in His life, and He struggled and prayed to discern God's will. When we are looking into our uncertain futures, wondering what's next, wondering what's best, wondering what decision is good for us, good for our loved ones, what decision would meet with God's approval, it's comforting, I think, to know that Jesus also wrestled the same uncertainty. He wasn't a pre-programmed robot. When He came to a fork in the road, He would go off by himself to meditate and pray about which road to take.

So Jesus and the three disciples went up on a mountain to rest – to pray – to sort things out – to take a breather. When suddenly, Jesus was transfigured before them – changed, transformed from one likeness to another. Perhaps He glowed from within. His garments became glistening, intensely white as no product on earth could bleach them. And Jesus was changed before them. And as if this wasn't out of the ordinary enough, there then appeared Moses and Elijah, Moses the lawgiver, Elijah the prophet.

What were they doing? "I know what's happening," thinks Peter, who usually had an answer. "It's the second coming." Remember the prophet Malachi said, "Behold I will send you Elijah before the great day of the Lord, or maybe we've died and gone to heaven . After all, that's what the scriptures say happened to Elijah. No one knows where Moses was buried, but legend has it that he too, had gone to heaven. Is God trying to reach us to tell us that death has no dominion? That there's hope for the journey? Quickly, let's build booths – put up tents. Let's invite them in, and honor these sacred visitors. Let's do whatever we can to make this experience last."

These disciples must have been dumbfounded, even wonderfully afraid. It was as though they were recipients of a great secret, privileged beyond belief to hear from God who Jesus really is. A cloud came over them and a voice spoke from the cloud. "This is my beloved Son – Listen to Him." Could this be the same voice that others had reported hearing when Jesus was baptized? After all, the words were the same, "This is my Son the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased." The disciples may have recalled the cloud that came over Moses centuries earlier and realized it was the same voice.

What a moment! What a moment it must have been for Peter and the others as they saw Christ transformed before them and then, within seconds, poof! Everything returned to normal. Glowing faces and clothes were gone. Jesus was just Jesus, standing there. There were no more sacred visitors, no clouds, no voices.

Everything was back to normal. Only once you've been to the mountain-top, once you've glimpsed the glory, and a touch of pure transcendence, a revelation of the inner nature of Jesus, a sighting of the future God has in store for us, then there is no such thing as living the same life as before.

Getting a glimpse of God – of what God has in store for us – have you had occasions like that? When if just for a brief time God sort of let you in on how life could be – when you sort of basked in divine possibilities? Maybe it was a moment in worship when you were overwhelmed and that this is what it's like to really praise God – or a time when you were at a fellowship dinner and discovered that a congregation can be at its best when it eats together, or maybe you were present at the birth of a child or grandchild, overcome with emotion, and realizing this is how God feels at all of our births. When have you had a chance to get a glimpse of what life in the Kingdom can really be like?

During our time in Jamaica, our leader, Dean Thomson (Don's brother), would lead us in a time of reflection every evening. He would begin by asking us, "Where did you see God today?" Throughout the week, we heard various responses to that question. Sometimes, the situations in which we saw the divine involved action upon the part of one of our mission team members. The major focus of our ministry in Jamaica is the health clinic. Persons wanting to be seen by a doctor begin lining up on the clinic porch at 5:30 a.m. On one occasion, there was a woman who had chronic foot pain because of the ill fitting shoes she had been wearing. Clinic staff couldn't find any spare shoes large enough for her. Dean's wife, Keitha, realized that the woman in

need had feet about the same size as Dean, so Dean took off his sneakers and gave them to the woman. Dean worked the rest of the week in sandals, and a woman left the clinic relieved of pain. God was seen in this act of healing and compassion.

One evening, when Dean asked, "Where did you see God today?" our dentist, Randy, spoke of the woman who had told him that afternoon that she would soon be representing her congregation at a conference and she was afraid of embarrassing her church because of the way her front teeth looked. The dentist spent some extra time with her, and did some cosmetic dentistry to give her a smile of which she could be proud. She left with renewed confidence in herself and pride in her congregation. We saw in this act of compassion the touch of God as the restorer of hope.

Sometimes we basked in the glow of the divine through gestures from the Jamaicans themselves. I had the opportunity to visit Blossom Gardens, an orphanage for children up to age seven – children who had been abused, or abandoned, by their family. Yet these children reflected the love of God in the way they smiled or reached out to us when we walked by. We saw the love God has for all children in the way in which the staff cared for these little ones. And it would have been impossible not to see God in the faces of the residents at the Golden Age Nursing Home – the infirmary – when we joined them one evening for singing. Again, these are persons who have been abandoned by family and cast off by society – but they found a real home at the infirmary – physically and mentally, challenged, weak, some with loss of hearing or sight. To watch and hear them sing – "We are blessed. We are blessed – everyday of our lives, we are blessed." All of us left the infirmary that evening having felt blessed ourselves by God.

We got a glimpse of the Kingdom while in Jamaica – where young and old are respected and cared for – where wounds are healed, where hope is restored, where skin color doesn't matter, where praises are genuine and faith lived out and joy expressed. We saw God every day.

Wednesday marks the beginning of our Lenten journey toward Easter. Today we get a fleeting glimpse of the resurrection splendor of the Lord, to sustain us in the long watches of the Lenten solemnity, to assure us that beyond the cross, there is hope. As we prepare to enter Lent, we stop to reassess where we have been – who we have come to understand our Savior to be as we have observed His birth and His baptism. And the various events of His ministry commemorated during the past six weeks. And we assess where we are. In what way do our hopes, our motives, or values reflect our claims to be Christians? In what ways do we still need to be transformed? To answer such questions candidly is to set the stage for our Lenten discipline – which is intended to be more far-reaching than going on a diet or giving up chocolate for forty days. Lenten discipline is nothing less than a thorough-going re-examination of who we are in light of who God wants us to be; and it is a reassurance to us concerning what divine grace can cause us to become. Lent is our annual "Brush with death" which enables us to see ourselves in an entirely new light. That light is provided by Christ upon the mountain as He shares with us God's glory and points us to the glorious reign of God that lies before us. The experience of God's glory may be awe-inspiring or fleeting, but what is sustaining and transfiguring is the touch of Jesus Christ.

In my time in ministry, I have seen with my own eyes the transforming power of Christ, the power to bring peace to the dying, hope to the despondent, courage to the weak, direction to the aimless, a change in behavior for the addicted. I have felt the peace of Christ in my own life, have experienced His forgiveness for my sins, and have known the reality of His presence when I felt lost. In the words of Pastor Terry Swicegood:

In a few minutes we will leave this sanctuary, to reenter an unbelievably brutal world and do battle for another seven days. We leave with the same problems we came in with today, some of which we have created, some of which have entered our lives like the unwelcome visit of in-laws. But as we leave, we have been to the mountaintop. We have seen our Lord transfigured before us. . . . For we have felt the sunshine of his face fall upon us. We have felt his touch. We have heard him say, "I am with you always."

As we leave today, we may not be completely transfigured, but we are not the same as when we came in. For a few moments eternity has broken into our world. Yes, it is true, it all too quickly recedes, and we're back in the real world. But Jesus remains with us. The glimpse of eternity we have had then serves as a sign in a climber's register on a difficult peak in the North Cascades, "Yes, you can. Others have."

As we prepare to enter Lent, perhaps the words of Fred Craddock could be useful:

When I was in my late teens, I wanted to be a preacher. When I was in my late twenties, I wanted to be a good preacher. Now that I am older, I want more than anything else to be a Christian. To live simply, to love generously, to speak truthfully, to serve faithfully, and leave everything else to God.

Thank you, O God, for these occasions when You give us a peek at how wonderful is Your Kingdom. Transform us, and may others get a glimpse of You in us.