

“The Majestic Glory”

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Exodus 24:12-18 + 2 Peter 1:16-21 + Matthew 17:1-9

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Transfiguration of the Lord

What is the most majestic thing you have ever seen? Pause and consider a moment. Where have you traveled; what have you seen? The Grand Canyon? Yosemite? The Rocky Mountains? The Redwoods? Victoria Falls? Table Mountain? Mount Fuji? The Swiss Alps? The Great Barrier Reef? I’ve been to a few of those places; perhaps you have too. Here’s a picture I took from the summit of Haleakalā, in Hawai’i, with the sun setting into the clouds that were *below* me. I use that as the desktop picture on my laptop. Here’s another picture I took, much closer to home, just about a mile east of town on M-36, when I was out for an early morning bike ride some fifteen years ago. I use that picture as the wallpaper on my phone. There are a multitude of majestic places on earth, some near, some far. There is also majesty in the heavens; here is another picture I took from the summit of Haleakalā, after the sun had set. I lay down and looked up, and there, right above me, in brilliant array, plainly visible, was the constellation Scorpius. It was *glorious*. I identified it immediately – I do happen to be a Scorpio!

Our scripture passages this morning have to do with *majesty*; specifically, with the majesty of *God*. They describe two events, two pivotal events, one that took place in Egypt, and another that took place in Galilee. We do not have pictures of these events, of course; there were no cameras in the ancient world. Nor do we have any artistic representations of these events from any of the eyewitnesses. All we have are *words*, and of course words do not do justice to the reality. Take the most majestic picture you have ever taken, and try to put it into words. It’s hard to do, isn’t it? It is said that “a picture is worth a thousand words.” That’s true enough in a general sense; it’s even more true when you are trying to capture something *majestic*. Bear that in mind as we explore these scripture passages. The words probably do not come anywhere *close* to the magnificent grandeur and beauty of what happened.

First: in Egypt, at Mount Sinai. The Israelites have escaped slavery in Egypt. They have traveled through the wilderness and come to this mountain in the Sinai Peninsula. Today it is called *Jabal Musa*, which is an Arabic name, meaning “Mount of Moses,” for it was here that Moses received the Ten Commandments from God. When the Israelites arrive at Mount Sinai in the 19th chapter in the book of Exodus, they behold the majesty of God: “On the morning of the third day there was thunder and lightning, as well as a thick cloud on the mountain and a blast of a trumpet so loud that all the people who were in the camp trembled. Moses brought the people out of the camp to meet God. They took their stand at the foot of the mountain. Now all of Mount Sinai was wrapped in smoke, because the Lord had descended upon it in fire; the smoke went up like the smoke of a kiln, while the whole mountain shook violently. As the blast of the trumpet grew louder and louder, Moses would speak and God would answer him in thunder. When the Lord descended upon Mount Sinai, to the top of the mountain, the Lord summoned Moses to the top of the mountain, and Moses went up.” (Exodus 19:16-

20) God speaks the words of the Ten Commandments, and the people are overwhelmed: “When all the people witnessed the thunder and lightning, the sound of the trumpet, and the mountain smoking, they were afraid and trembled and stood at a distance and said to Moses, ‘You speak to us, and we will listen, but do not let God speak to us, lest we die.’ Moses said to the people, ‘Do not be afraid, for God has come only to test you and to put the fear of him upon you so that you do not sin.’ Then the people stood at a distance, while Moses drew near to the thick darkness where God was.” (Exodus 20:18-21) God then gives Moses many more laws – three whole chapters’ worth. Moses shares these laws with the people; they agree to abide by them, and Moses writes them all down. Collectively, that set of laws is called the “Book of the Covenant.” There is a ceremony to ratify that covenant, and then God invites Moses to come back up to the top of the mountain. Here is where our reading this morning picks up. Once again, Moses experiences the majesty of God: “Then Moses went up on the mountain, and the cloud covered the mountain. The glory of the Lord settled on Mount Sinai, and the cloud covered it for six days; on the seventh day he called to Moses out of the cloud. Now the appearance of the glory of the Lord was like a devouring fire on the top of the mountain in the sight of the Israelites. Moses entered the cloud and went up on the mountain. Moses was on the mountain for forty days and forty nights.”

That is the first majestic event in today’s scripture readings. Remember, all we have are the *words*. We have to use our *imagination*s to consider what that experience might have been like for Moses and for the Israelites. I am inclined to believe that it was more majestic than anything any of us have ever seen. This is the glory of *God*. If God can make the Grand Canyon, Yosemite, the Rocky Mountains, the Redwoods, Victoria Falls, Table Mountain, Mount Fuji, the Swiss Alps, the Great Barrier Reef, every glorious sunrise or sunset you have ever seen, and all the majesty of the cosmos – if those are *works* of our Creator – imagine how majestic is that *Creator*. *Majestic* might be an understatement!

The second event took place more than twelve centuries later. Once again, there are no pictures, and no artistic renderings from eyewitnesses. All we have are *words* that attempt to capture what Peter, James, and John experienced. Matthew says Jesus led the three of them up a high mountain, by themselves. We think it was probably this mountain, Mount Tabor, in the northern part of Israel, some ten miles west of the Sea of Galilee, because this is the only mountain in the vicinity of where Jesus and his disciples were that fits the description in the biblical texts. It’s not a huge mountain – less than 2000 feet elevation – but it is tall enough that the top of it does sometimes get covered by clouds.

Matthew gets straight to the point: Jesus “was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became bright as light.” To be “transfigured” means that your appearance changes; your *figure* is *transformed*. This is the one and only time in the life of Jesus – before his death and resurrection – in which something like this happens. In every other story, he looks like a perfectly normal human. Not here. “His face shone like the sun, and his clothes became bright as light.” Then, “Suddenly there appeared to them Moses and Elijah, talking with him.” These are two of the greatest figures from biblical history; Moses, of course, is the chief Lawgiver of Israel, a great teacher; and Elijah is one of the most important Prophets, a miracle-worker. Jesus is both teacher *and* miracle-worker; he is the culmination of both the Law and the Prophets. Imagine being there, on the mountain with Jesus, beholding this majestic moment. Peter wishes the moment would last – he offers to build tents for Jesus, Moses, and Elijah, so they can all stick around and have a place to rest their heads – but then something *else* happens: “While he was still speaking, suddenly a bright cloud overshadowed them, and a voice from the cloud said, ‘This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!’”

The three disciples realize: they are hearing the voice of *God*. Like those Israelites did at Mount Sinai, all those centuries earlier. Peter, James, and John would have known that story; it would have been told and re-told in the Jewish synagogues. Those three men probably never imagined that *they themselves* would ever hear the voice of *God*. Looking back on the event, several decades later, Peter writes that they “had been eyewitness of his majesty.” They had experienced nothing less than the *glory of God* at the top of that mountain. They had also heard the majestic voice that very few people before them or after them have ever heard. “We ourselves heard this voice come from heaven,” Peter writes, “while we were with him on the holy mountain.” It terrified them; Matthew writes that when they heard it, “they fell to the ground and were overcome by fear.” They had never experienced anything like that in their life. The *majesty* of God, the *voice* of God, and a transfigured Jesus, his face shining as bright as the sun itself. This was not an everyday occurrence! This was something utterly *remarkable*. *Glorious*. It leaves a lasting impression on those disciples. You don’t behold the majesty of God and walk away *unchanged*.

Have you ever experienced anything like that? Have you ever beheld the *majesty of God*? Or ever heard the *voice* of God? Some of you might say *yes*, that you can look back on the events in your life and pinpoint a moment, or more than one moment, when you experienced the Reality of the Divine. You can’t *make* that happen; you can’t *will* God to appear visibly or to speak audibly to you. God will speak when God will speak, and *God* chooses when that happens. I would strongly encourage you to be *open* to it happening. Be open to the possibility that God might *appear* to you, *visibly*, in a way similar to what Moses and the Israelites and the three disciples of Jesus experienced. Be open to the possibility that God might *speak* to you, *audibly*, in a way similar to what Moses and the Israelites and the three disciples of Jesus experienced. *Be open to the possibility*. Moses, the Israelites, and the disciples of Jesus did not *expect* to experience God like that. God surprised them. God might very well surprise you.

What difference did those experiences make in the lives of the people who experienced them? For the Israelites, they got to hear, *very clearly*, the *most important lessons* God wanted them to know, what Jews now call “the Ten Words,” and what we Christians call “the Ten Commandments.” For Peter, James, and John, they got to hear, *very clearly*, God declaring just *how critical* Jesus’s words are: “This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!” That has *huge* implications. It means that when Jesus says, “Love your enemies,” God *really wants us* to love people who hate us. When Jesus says, “whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret,” God *really wants us* to pray in private. When Jesus says, “Do not judge, so that you may not be judged,” God *really wants us* to not pass judgment on other people. When Jesus says, “Do to others as you would have them do to you,” God *really wants us* to treat other people the way we want to be treated. When Jesus tells us to give food to the hungry, give drink to the thirsty, give clothing to the naked, welcome the stranger, take care of the sick, and visit the imprisoned, God *really wants us* to do all those things. “*Listen to him*,” God bellows – and God *means* it! No more of this wishy-washy, listening to Jesus when we feel like it and not listening when we don’t, no more choosing what teachings of Jesus to listen to and what parts to ignore, no more treating Jesus as if he is *anything less* than the Beloved Son of God.

So even if we never ever have an opportunity to behold the majesty of God with our own eyes, even if we never ever have an opportunity to hear the voice of God with our own ears, we still know *very clearly* how God wants us to live our lives. *Listen to Jesus!* Just listen to Jesus, folks. Just listen to Jesus.

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