

Green Hill Presbyterian Church
“Glimpses of Glory”
Thomas G. Speers, III
Transfiguration—February 11, 2018

Lessons: 2 Kings 2:1-12; Mark 9:2-9.

Some of you will know Thornton Wilder’s marvelous play *Our Town*, which takes place in a small New Hampshire village and tells the story of its inhabitants. Towards the end of the play, Emily Webb Gibbs has died in childbirth and gone to live amongst the dead. She persuades the Stage Manager who is a kind of heavenly being to let her return to the living, to experience again one day of her life. She chooses a birthday when she was little but she soon discovers that it is too painful to continue. Everyone else is so wrapped up in their own world that they don’t really notice all the little things going on all around them. They say the right things; her parents wish her a happy birthday, but they fail to look much past the surface. They take so much for granted. So the Stage Manager takes Emily back amongst those who have died and she asks him if anyone ever really notices everything that is going on? And he quite honestly says, “no” and then almost as an afterthought he says, “the saints and poets maybe.”¹

Does anybody ever really notice everything that is going on all the time? No, the saints and poets maybe. Like the inhabitants of Grovers Corners we live in our own worlds, veiled from much that is going on. Sometimes that veil is self-inflicted; we don’t want to see what’s going on around us. Sometimes our sight is limited because of illness or suffering. Most of us don’t see everything that is going on, yet, many of us would also admit a deep-seated hunger for something more, a longing for understanding and affirmation, a desire to see something of God’s presence in the midst of our living. Our sight is veiled and yet we also want a glimpse of glory.

Our gospel today tells the story of the transfiguration of Jesus, where Jesus invites three of his disciples to join him on the top of a mountain where he is transfigured. The disciples get a glimpse of glory. Now to understand the story of the transfiguration you have to know some of the background. The disciples had been called to follow Jesus and in that following they had developed a particular understanding of Jesus and who he was. They had seen him heal and comfort the sick. They had helped him feed the hungry. They had watched him walk on water. They had begun to think that Jesus was someone special. Just days before the transfiguration, Jesus had asked them who they thought he was and Peter had declared: “You are the Messiah.” You’re the one we’ve been waiting for. Yet they had a problem of translation. They thought the Messiah would redeem Israel. They thought the Messiah would throw out the Roman occupying forces and restore the glory of Jerusalem. They thought that happy days were here again, so they were understandably confused and upset when Jesus explained that he was going to suffer, be rejected, be killed, and after three days rise again. Peter was so confused and upset that he took Jesus aside and explained to him that this just couldn’t be. This didn’t fit their understanding of the Messiah and Jesus responds with the strongest possible rebuke: “Get behind me Satan! You are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.” And Jesus continues with words about denying ourselves and taking up the cross and following. He doesn’t say why people have to carry those crosses; he just says that we do.

¹ Thornton Wilder, *Our Town*. Harper Collins © 1938, 1965

That is the background to the story of the transfiguration. The disciples had a preconceived notion of who Jesus was and that is transfigured on the mountaintop. There they hear the voice speaking from the cloud, the same voice that spoke at Jesus' baptism, but with one great difference. At the baptism the voice said: "You are my son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." At the transfiguration the voice proclaims: "This is my son, the Beloved; listen to him." Listen to him when he tells you that discipleship is not all glory, but it also involves suffering. Listen to him when he describes a whole new understanding of the Messiah. Listen to him when he explains that love is the most powerful force in the universe. Listen to him when he tells you that you must take up your cross and follow. Listen to him.

There in the cloud, in their confusion and suffering, the disciples get a glimpse of glory. Their questions are not all answered; their fears are not all relieved. Yet their questions and fears are transfigured. They don't yet understand why they have to take up the cross and follow, but they now have an idea that in doing so they are moving towards glory. The mountain for them is what Irish and Scottish mystics might call a "thin place" where the veil that separates the human and the divine is gossamer thin. In that place they discover that God is especially present in times of confusion and fear and suffering. The cloud parts and there they see Jesus.

For us, like the disciples, like the inhabitants of Grovers Corners, we don't see everything that is going on and we don't understand why people have to suffer. Yet, in following Jesus, in listening to Jesus, the disciples caught glimpses of glory even in the midst of suffering and confusion. I want to suggest today that our own experiences of suffering and joy can be thin places where we catch a glimpse of God's glory. The Celtic peoples were forever noticing thin places in nature. We might notice that glory in the first snowdrops or crocuses that transform a winter landscape. The joy of attending childbirth and the mystery of watching someone die, these can be thin places. People can offer a glimpse of glory when we stop and really listen to what another has to say. Peter Gomes suggests that if we know the experience of suffering and we want to catch a glimpse of God's glory, we want to experience something of joy, perhaps we should go to a "black gospel church when first the choir and then the whole congregation 'get happy' or carried away in the spirit. It doesn't happen right away, it takes a while. It begins and spreads slowly, gathering momentum, and then no one is immune." Go visit a church that gets carried away in its singing, which sometimes we can do right here, and you can get a glimpse of glory. Yet a white sociologist friend of Gomes once asked him "why black people, who had so little to sing about, who knew so little joy in either the wicked South or the brutal North, sang so much? Were they singing simply to drive away dull care? Was this a form of diversion, a self-induced ecstasy to kill the throb of deadening existence? Was this an opiate or a primal scream, or a religious form of kicking the dog after a bad day or week or life? I concluded that my friend had read too much Joseph Campbell and not enough of the Bible. The brothers and sisters weren't singing to drive dull care away, nor were they irrigating their sorrows or sublimating their fears...They sang because they knew themselves to be at the thin place between this world and another, and while their daily existence might be bound hand and foot to a world in which there was little about which to be glad, they nevertheless knew that they 'had a mansion on high,' and that knowledge was so delicious, so absolute, and so paradoxical that they had to sing about it. Such joy did not make sense out of reality; it transcended [or transfigured] and overwhelmed what passed for reality. That is what every cook, hairdresser, chauffeur, Pullman porter, mailman, laundress, seamstress, old auntie, and arthritic uncle

knew and recognized as true when Mahalia Jackson would begin to sing: *Why should I feel discouraged, and why should the shadows fall, And why should my heart feel lonely and I dream of a heaven I know. When Jesus is my portal, a constant friend is he: His eye is on the sparrow, and I know he watches me... I sing because I'm happy, I sing because I'm free, For his eye is on the sparrow, and I know he watches me.*²

Listen to Jesus and what Jesus proclaims is that whoever you are, wherever you are, especially if you know about suffering, especially if you are afraid or confused, especially if you are considered unclean, unwashed, unworthy, God is present with you. God won't necessarily take away your suffering or your confusion, but God does transfigure it. Jesus proclaims that we are never alone, most especially in our difficult times. If you know what it is to live in a cloud where you can't see all that is going on around you then listen for a voice that calls you beloved and watch for a glimpse of God's glory.

Let us pray: Most gracious God, when we are living in the valley take us up the mountain and transfigure our lives that we might hear your word for us and catch a glimpse of your glorious presence. Through Jesus Christ we pray. Amen.

² Peter Gomes, *The Good Book, Reading the Bible with Mind and Heart*. William Morrow & Company. © 1996.