

Glory in the Dark

– a sermon on the Transfiguration
Silvia Purdie, February 2022

Bible reading: **Luke 9:23-36**

(please note: this is a longer text than a usual scripture text in worship)

I remember when my father had a cataract operation. Before the operation his vision had become quite dark and blurred. And after the bandage was removed, he could see again. It is an astonishing thing. Has anyone here had that experience?

Can you think of a time in your own life when you were struggling to see and then suddenly the cloud clears, and there it is – amazing!

I was recently staying at a campsite at the base of the mountains, and for the first 2 days the cloud was low, the mountain tops were hidden. Then yesterday morning I woke early and decided to get up and get out for a walk, and it was so beautiful as the first rays of sun touched Mt Somers and all was still and magical.

The mountain was revealed in all its glory.

I want to talk about glory this morning. I wonder what you have described as glorious.

I talked last time I was here about how the Gospels came to be written, and I want to take you back to that conversation. I suggested that, from my understanding, Mark wrote his gospel first, and the Matthew and Luke each worked with Mark's Gospel and added in other bits and tweaked Mark to tidy it up a bit and to bring out their own convictions about who Jesus was.

Today's text is a great window into that process. The story of the Transfiguration is in Mark, Matthew and Luke, pretty much the same. Definitely recognisable as copied from one to the other. Matthew copies Mark almost word for word. Luke does too, but Luke adds in a few bits here and there. I am suggesting that Mark recorded the story as he was told it by Peter. Luke may have also heard the story, I don't know.

So what does Luke change?

One curious detail that Luke adds in is that in his retelling the disciples are fast asleep, up there on the mountain top. Jesus is alone praying and his friends are asleep. Does that remind you of another story?

Yes, the garden of Gethsemane. Which is interesting because just before telling this story each of the gospels tell of Jesus starting to confront his disciples with his willingness to die the terrible death of crucifixion. So the events of the present are shadowed by the coming events of Easter. See how Luke makes this connection even stronger by linking together the Jesus in his brilliance on the mountain with Jesus in his suffering in the Garden of Gethsemane.

One of the amazing things about all the gospels is that as they describe the experience of the disciples they also invite us, the readers of the text, to enter into this experience, to share with the disciples. These are not just books about past events, they are living containers for faith in Jesus. So when Luke writes that the disciples were fast asleep and they open their eyes to see the glory of Jesus, up there on that mountain, he is inviting us also to wake up and see Jesus.

This powerful double dynamic is what makes the Gospels the most powerful books ever written, in my humble opinion.

So there is this moment that Luke opens up for us. Four men camped out overnight high on a mountain. One of them is alone, communing with God. Three of them are curled up in their cloaks as comfortable in the tussock as they can get, all deeply asleep. It is light, unexpected light, that drags them out of their sleep. And they realise that the light is actually coming from their friend Jesus. Not something they had ever seen before. He is blazing with light. They probably figure they are still asleep and dreaming. Then they stumble to their feet and realise that there are three figures in the light, not just Jesus. That is quite a lot to take in when you are half awake! Somehow, I'm not sure how, they work out that these two men are the greatest heroes of the faith, Moses and Elijah. Sure, of course, why not?!

Peter is not very coherent, but he bumbles into speech, wanting to catch the moment, offering to build tabernacles for each of them. I don't know how he planned on building anything in the middle of the night on top of a mountain. Nice idea, Peter, but what -? But the moment is fading, Moses and Elijah are disappearing, Peter can't hang on to them, there's no time for conversation. Then in the after glow of the brilliance they find themselves in thick cloud, still lit with radiance, and into that misty mystical space comes a voice: "This is my Son, I have Chosen him, I love him. Listen to him." And then the cloud dissipates, normality reasserts itself, and it is again just the four of them standing in the darkness.

What do you think happened next?

One of the odd things about the story is that it does not tell us Jesus saying anything to the disciples. They almost seem to be irrelevant, observers, waking up just in time to catch the end of something happening without them – like Moses catching a glimpse of the back of God as Yahweh passed by.

But my guess is that Jesus then made them a cup of tea. Astonishing moments come our way sometimes in life, and then they pass and we reestablish our feet back on the ground. Mind you, I don't suppose the disciples got much sleep the rest of the night! And when they came back to normality the next day, they had no words for what they had witnessed up there in the cloud. Mark tells us, presumably as Peter had told him, that Peter and James and John sometimes, when no one else was there, would wonder to themselves if they had dreamed it, and struggled to make any sense of their completely bizarre shared memory ... and only after the resurrection, when others also had seen the glory of the risen Jesus, did they dare to tell the story of what they had seen.

So what did they see, do you think? Luke adds a significant word into Mark's version of the story: Glory. Mark only says that Jesus' clothes were brighter than bright. Luke sharpens it by saying that the men say the Glory of Jesus.

So what is this thing we call Glory?

The Greek word is *Doxa*. ... you may have heard of the doxology.

This is a very ancient practice, from Jewish times, adapted into Christian tradition, upheld in Catholic and Orthodox traditions,

Glory to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit: as it was in the beginning, is now, and will be for ever. Amen.

It relates back to Luke again because it echoes the song of the angels at the birth of Jesus
"Glory to God in the highest heaven,

and on earth peace among those whom he favors!"

So glory was an important idea to Luke, obviously. Glory is shown there on the mountain in divine light. And glory is also shown in the ultimate surrender of Jesus, his tears and suffering on the night before he was crucified. When Luke tells the story of two disciples

walking to Emmaus on Easter Sunday afternoon, he describes the man walking with them saying,

Was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things and then enter into his glory?"

Suffering and glory.

Glory is the greatness and otherness of God, and Jesus already had that mantle on him, that light within him – on the mountain that night his disciples caught a glimpse of that brilliance for a short moment. But Luke makes it very clear, over and over, that this divinity was not something to be imposed on the world. For God's loving power to be available to all people, available with fully freedom and respect for us, required the greatest sacrifice, the greatest outpouring of God's own self, at the greatest cost – even to death on a cross.

You and I probably would not have chosen this way. I should probably speak for myself – I wouldn't! I want the praise without the pain, thank you. The glory without the grave. This is why the gospels are the most amazing books ever written, because they tell the way of the cross. They contain the most incredible divine power ever experienced by humanity and they funnel it into the steps of Jesus as he walks inexorably closer and closer to that cross. That darned cross. All the gospels are in the shape of the cross. This is the way that God chose.

And God chose it for us.

Jesus called those who want to truly live to walk with him. Not in our own strength or for our own glory, but to share in the glory of God in the face of Christ Jesus.

Then he said to them all, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me.

So that we might live larger and larger, truer and truer, as we give back the praise to God – to say "Glory to God in the highest!"

Glory to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit: as it was in the beginning, is now, and will be for ever. Amen.

Suitable hymns for the Transfiguration:

Hymn: Holy, holy, holy (WOV 65)

Hymn: How good Lord to be here (WOV 390)

Hymn: In Christ Alone

Song: Shine, Jesus, Shine

(Read as an opening reading): Christ is the world's true light (WOV 179)