

HOW DARE A PERSON OPEN HER MOUTH TO SPEAK, AFTER THOSE READINGS?! Preachers always respond with some fear and trembling and awe, awareness of the *hutzpah* of undertaking to say anything. Especially so after today's readings about the glory of God revealed.

You may remember the oft-quoted observation by poet Annie Dillard that if we were really aware of what we are doing in church, whose presence we address and invoke, we'd come wearing crash helmets, there'd be seat belts in the pews. And maybe we would, from time to time, dive under those pews, for cover.

All the readings today speak of the glory of God revealed to human beings. We may think of glory in terms of fame, stardom, and lots of razzle dazzle, and there are plenty of powerful and even alarming displays accompanying the presence of divine glory in these texts. But it is not all show, nor is the divine glory fleeting, as fame and stardom so often are. The glory of God has to do with God's substance, or *gravitas*.

The Hebrew for "glory" (*kabod*) means "weight" or "heaviness." (When I learned this in seminary, I was delighted, and walked around the seminary close singing, "Heavy, heavy, heavy, is the Lord God of hosts!") Where the Lord reveals his glory, what is revealed is massively, overwhelmingly present and real. It is the heart of what we seek, the meaning and steadfast presence at the heart of the world. Compared to the reality of God's glory, everything else is ephemeral, foolishness and vanity.

There are conflicting traditions in the O.T. about experiencing/seeing the glory of the Lord. Both reflect the enormity of such an event. Tradition holds that one cannot look on the face of the Lord and live. There is a story a little later in the Bk. Of Exodus (33:17, ff.) about Moses himself asking to see the Lord's glory. That time, the Lord placed him in the cleft of a rock and warned him not to look until after the Lord had passed by, "for no one shall see me and live." (*See also*, Ex. 19:21)

And yet, there also are those who *saw* the Lord face to face, and lived. Among them is Isaiah who "saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lofty; and the hem of his robe filled the temple." (Isa. 6:1) And, of course, there is Moses, who is revered in Judaism because he saw the Lord face to face. And there were some others. In verses immediately before today's reading, a group of leaders of the people—the 70 elders, three others, and Moses—also "saw the God of Israel." "God did not lay his hand on the chief men of the people of Israel; also they beheld God, and they ate and drank." (Ex. 24:9-11)

This is all very mysterious. It seems to reflect, at the very least, a strong ambivalence about being in the presence of the Lord, if not out-and-out terror. How near one can safely dare to come, how deeply enter with safety into this Presence is of great concern. One might reasonably hesitate even to begin, whether on a mountain top or the quiet of one's study.

Before Moses went up the mountain, all the people had been warned not to come too close. The Lord descended in fire and the mountain was wrapped in thick smoke. The people heard the Lord speak directly to them, following thunder and lightning, the appearance of a thick cloud on the mountain, and a trumpet blast that made them all tremble. (Ex 19:16) Afterwards, the people begged Moses to speak to the Lord *himself*, but not to let God speak to *them*, “or we will die.” (Ex. 20:18-19)

Moses entered fully into the Lord’s presence, into the cloud—leaving the realm of earth and entering the realm of heaven, as it were. (24:18) He did not come away unchanged. When he came down off the mountain, “the skin of his face shone,” so that the people were afraid to come near him. Afterward, whenever he had finished talking with the Lord, he would put a veil on his face. (Ex. 34:29-35) There is something transforming and unnerving in even the reflection of the glory of God. Not a safe encounter if we hope to come away unchanged ourselves.

Elijah, who appeared on the mountain in Galilee with Moses and Jesus, also had experienced the power of the glory of God. First in the contest with the rival prophets of Baal, when Yahweh broke out in fire that fell from heaven and burned up not only the drenched offering, the wood for the fire, but also the whole altar itself, the dust, and even the water in the trench around the altar. The people were suitably impressed, and said “The Lord indeed is God; the Lord indeed is God.” (1 Kings 19:36-40) And in his zeal, Elijah slew all 450 of the prophets of Baal.

Then, after a sojourn of 40 days and 40 nights in the wilderness, on Mt. Sinai, Elijah experienced something very different. As the Lord was about to pass by, on the mountain there was a huge commotion: a wind that split the rocks in pieces, followed by an earthquake, and then a fire—elements we, and Elijah, might expect to declare the presence of divine glory. But the Lord was in none of these overpowering, violent effects. There was “a sound of sheer silence” (also translated “a still small voice”), and the Lord spoke to Elijah there. The zealous fighter for God went off to do God’s bidding, a much quieter, and, perhaps, introspective, prophet. Transformed, with his whole notion of what it is to be God’s prophet changed.

Jesus with the 3 disciples, in the presence of Moses and Elijah, transformed on the mountain top in Galilee. Not himself changed. The glory the 3 disciples saw was present in him, he was this glory, from the beginning. (As the prologue to the Gospel acc. to John tells us, he was in the beginning, with God, and he was God.) What happened was that his glory was revealed.

Are similarities between the Transfiguration and Moses on Mt. Sinai. They were on a mountain. God spoke out of a cloud. Like the face of Moses, the face of Jesus shone—“like the sun.” Those who looked on were afraid. There are parallels drawn between Jesus and Moses, and with Elijah, by his presence with Jesus. But Jesus is shown to be different from these two prophets, as well.

The voice from the cloud affirmed that Jesus is more than Moses or Elijah. “This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him.” When the disciples looked up, “they saw no one except Jesus himself alone.” He was shown to be as he had said in his first extended teaching, on another mountain: the fulfillment of the Law and the Prophets (Mt.5:17) It is he who has authority. The disciples are to listen and learn from him.

And what has he been saying. He “must go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering at the hands of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day rise again.” (16:21). At that, Peter, who was with him now on the mountain, had rebuked him. To which Jesus replied, “you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.” (16:22-23)

The voice affirmed not only that Jesus is the Son of God, Beloved, Messiah/Christ as Peter had recognized just six days before, but that what he was saying about himself and his future was true. Listen. Learn. Heed. Know that to follow him is to be changed. “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.”

What is happening. What is changing. Everything, and nothing. Jesus is the revelation of the same God who made the covenant with Israel at Mt. Sinai, who bound himself to them in steadfast love. Gave them a way to live in harmony with one another and with God. Who sent the prophets to call them back to covenant sanity and safety when they had wandered far from God. Who “is full of compassion and mercy, slow to anger and of great kindness. . . . As far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our sins from us.” (Ps. 103: 8, 10)

What is different. He has come. Emmanuel, God with us. Come with good news, with healing, and in vulnerability. To suffer with and for. Not to destroy. And to do all this quite openly, so that everyone can see and know God as revealed in Jesus.

All this glory was made visible to the 3 disciples on the mountain. But not yet fully known. They had to wait until all of it played out, because the change in their/our idea of God and God’s glory was so great. They could not comprehend it.

But the nature of God and God’s glory was not changed. As Jesus was with God from the beginning, this was God from the beginning. What was different was that, while on Mt. Sinai God did not lay his hand on Moses and the elders to destroy them, on the mountain of the Transfiguration, Jesus came to the disciples and touched them. In person, not total possibly incendiary glory though containing all glory. He touched them in healing, saying, “Do not be afraid.” Drawing us close to himself and to God in safety, so we can come close enough to know the enormity and grace of God’s love.

He is revealed even now in Scripture and in the breaking of the Bread. And in hands through which we are touched by his healing presence.

O, my God, you are here.
O, my God, I am here.
O, my God, they are here.
O, my God, we are here. And always, always, always, you love us.

(Dean Alan Jones)