

2 Pentecost, Proper 6, Yr. A
June 18, 2017
Romans 5:1-8; Matthew 9:35-10:8

I'd like to concentrate this morning on two key ideas in today's readings: the idea of God's glory – what is it and what does it mean for us, as Paul says in Romans, to hope to share in the glory of God; and how the idea of glory is translated into the idea of the Kingdom of God, as we read in Matthew's gospel.

I'd like to start with the idea of the glory of God. We use that phrase all the time. Most every divine messenger who shows up invokes the glory of God, e.g., the angels who announced Jesus' birth. Most Sundays we echo them when we sing The Gloria... "Glory to God in the highest..." And we often say that prayer that begins, "Glory to the Father..."

If we start with the Hebrew Scriptures, the glory of God is usually depicted as an awesome and dazzling display of power. As in the reading this morning, the people stay well away from the top of the mountain. They're more than happy to send Moses up to talk with God and bring back whatever message there is. The message in this passage is God's reminder of all that he has done for them, the use of his power to free and protect them, and then God's invitation to the Israelites to keep his covenant and to thereby be his treasured possession, a holy kingdom and a priestly nation. And, as we heard a few minutes ago, they seem to readily agree. But as we know from Biblical history as well as from our own experience, that is easier said than done.

This idea of the glory of God appears also in the Romans reading in which Paul says that we "boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God." What does he mean? The Hebrew word for "glory" is "kabod" and it means heavy or weighty. So, applied to a person it would mean a person who carried a lot of weight in the community. Someone of influence and power. There's also a sense of sovereignty and the prestige that comes with that. Perhaps one of the most memorable passages in the Hebrew Scriptures that illustrates this is the vision Isaiah has of God in the Temple when he says that the HEM of God's robe filled the entire Temple. So, especially in the Old Testament, there's a sense of awesome power, of otherness, of our unworthiness (you'll remember that Isaiah's response to this vision was to say "Woe is me" perhaps more accurately stated as Oy vey!) This is the transcendent, unapproachable God.

But there are other usages in the OT. One has to do with the presence of God. Again, you see that in the Isaiah passage – God's glory is connected with God's presence. Yet another has to do with GLORY as signifying the name and the very ESSENCE of God. It's who God IS. And here we can move from the transcendent, from the God who is unapproachable for us, to the immanent, the God who is present with us. That's what Jesus is all about. Jesus holds the two ideas about God together for us. Jesus not only IS God, but he also shows us the face of God. You'll remember the beginning of John's gospel in which John describes Jesus by saying, "We saw his glory, the glory of the Father's only son, full of grace and truth." And you'll also remember Jesus telling Philip, when Philip says, sounding a bit frustrated, I always think, "Show us the Father and we'll be satisfied," and Jesus' response, also perhaps a bit frustrated, "Have I been with you all this time...and you still don't get it? If you've seen ME, you HAVE seen the Father."

So, the word “glory” covers a lot of territory. It can mean power, or presence, or name, or essence. So, if we are a bit confused by it, we’re not the only ones. Remember that conversation between James and John, Jesus’ disciples, who want to have those seats on the right and left side of Jesus when he comes into his Kingdom? They’re thinking the glory equals power, period.

So what is Paul saying when he talks about our hope to share in the glory of God? I’d like to look closely at that whole passage from his letter to the Romans. This passage is part of what’s considered to be the central passage of his theology, ending in Ch. 8, with that wonderful, joyful passage that says that nothing, not life or death, or angels or principalities will ever separate us from the love of God. But here, he starts with saying that we’re justified. And that word isn’t used as we often do, to mean that we had a good excuse for doing what we did, but instead it means something like what we mean when we say the margin was “justified” – when what we were typing lined up correctly. Here “justified” means that we’re lined up correctly with God – it means that we’re finally in right relationship with God. And we got there, says Paul, not through our own efforts, but through our faith in Christ. And he goes on – because we are justified, we have PEACE – inner security and serenity. We also now, because of our right relationship with Christ and God, have access to grace. It’s thought that here Paul was using the image of an Eastern court. No one had access to the presence of the king except those introduced by someone who already had that access. In other words, we can now stand in the presence of God and receive God’s grace directly, because Christ has provided us with that direct access.

And then there’s that phrase about our “boast in our hope of sharing in the glory of God.” The first thing to note here is that word “boast” can also be translated as “rejoice.” We REJOICE in our hope of sharing in God’s glory. And here, I would argue that “glory” has to do with the essence of God, and with that image of God with which we were endowed at the very beginning of our lives and that is our destiny as sons and daughters of God – So we have hope and trust in this God who is constantly restoring us to our true destiny, which is to not only mirror God to all the creation, but to participate in God’s very life.

Sounds good, right? And how do we do that, exactly. Here it’s helpful to look at the Matthew reading. We hear Jesus instructing his disciples in this passage and, by extension, instructing us. He tells them to go out into the harvest and to exercise compassion for all those sheep without a shepherd. And he told them to mirror God in their lives and ministry as he had done. We hear what he did in the beginning of the passage: he taught in the synagogues and proclaimed the good news of the kingdom, curing every disease and sickness.

Proclaiming the kingdom – proclaiming that all of life, each person is precious, that life is an extraordinary gift, that we’re made to love and belong to one another. The Kingdom will have fully come when God’s glory and presence are fully manifest; when we come to realize that in God we live and more and have our being. But for now, we’re called to watch for those glimpses of God’s glory in our everyday lives, whenever we see beauty, or gladness or love. While Isaiah saw the transcendence of God and said “Woe is me,” I wonder if we can’t see the immanence of God and say “Wow” instead! In the lectionary group this past week, John (and I think he’s OK with me sharing this) talked about his first experience of calculus – and he said

when he figured out what it was about he simply said, WOW! Not what I would have said! But let me share a kind of wow experience with you that I had in NY. We had ridden the double-decker bus around Uptown Manhattan and ended up in Battery Park. The idea was to catch the ferry to go around the Statue of Liberty. Unfortunately, it was just after 5 o'clock and there were about a thousand people at the Ferry dock, most probably going home after work. While we were standing there trying to figure out what to do, my attention was drawn to a middle-aged black woman sitting and waiting for the ferry. Our eyes found each other and in a short space of time we gazed at, and dare I say recognized, one another, as somehow connected. After a period of time, we both smiled and both bowed and went on our respective ways. But for me, and I suspect for her, it was a glimpse of the kingdom, a glimpse of that shared image of God, a glimpse of God's glory.

One final story. This one is probably apocryphal, but it's an example of how we can touch and heal one another. It's about a little boy who wanted to meet God. He knew it would be a long trip, so he packed his suitcase with Twinkies and a six-pack of root beer and started off. When he had gone about three blocks, he met an old woman. She was sitting in the park just staring at some pigeons. The boy sat next to her and opened his suitcase. He was about to take a drink from his root beer when he noticed that she looked hungry, so he offered her a Twinkie. She gratefully accepted it and smiled at him. Her smile was so pretty that he wanted to see it again, so he offered her a root beer. Again, she accepted and smiled at him. He was delighted. They sat there all afternoon eating and smiling, but they never said a word. As it grew dark, the boy realized how tired he was and he got up to leave, but before he had gone more than a few steps, he turned around, ran back to the woman and gave her a hug. She gave him her biggest smile ever. When he got home a little later, his mother was surprised by the look of joy on his face. She ask him, "What did you do today that made you so happy?" He replied, "I had lunch with God." And before she could respond, he said, "You know what? She's got the most beautiful smile I've even seen!" Meanwhile the old woman, also radiant with joy, returned to her home. Her son was stunned by the look of peace on her face and asked, "Mother, what did you do today that made you so happy?" She replied, "I ate Twinkies in the part with God." And, before he responded, she added, "You know, he's much younger than I expected."

God's glory is all around us. Keep an eye out! Amen