

Glory

When Moses came down from the mountain his face was radiant. I don't mean that in the metaphorical sense. This wasn't "Moses just came down and he kind of has this otherworldly look on his face." This was more along the lines of Aaron and the leaders saying to Moses, "Your face is glowing and you're scaring the children, please, for decency's sake *put this on to cover yourself.*"

Moses in that moment shined with the glory of God, and it was for the people altogether too much divinity to bear. Moses had to put a veil over his face, and uncover it once again each time he would go before the Lord.

Imagine that – being so changed in the presence of God – that you actually retained that presence in your body and on your face when you returned to camp.

The people, though, were not ready for it. Nor, I think, are we. This idea of radiant Glory doesn't really make sense in our world. Where does Glory fit? Where does this idea of otherworldly magnificence, of beauty beyond description, of actual and visible luminosity find a home in a world that teeters unstably between self-centered rationalism and angry moralism? Sure, we'll give some attention to the Angels we hear on high, once a year, who sing of the Glory of God, who themselves light up the night with their own resplendency. Sometimes we'll even use that word *glorious* to describe something beyond wonderful, beyond beautiful, though when we do we do so a little self-consciously because it can feel a little risky to use that word.

What is it? What is Glory? If it's a quality of God's presence are we even allowed to name it? Are we able to use it

on something that doesn't apply specifically to Yahweh lest we take in vain an adjective that belongs to God and God alone?

Can we experience Glory? Can we see with our own eyes this luminous presence, or do we simply take on faith what we read in Exodus and in the gospels? Of course we know better that to trust the self-glorification of this world: the glory of battle, the glory of success. We know that these are fleeting at best and terrible ego traps at worse. But could it be possible to experience what Moses did when he was in the presence of God, when he came down from the mountain?

Moses, of course was not the presence of God. He was the bearer of the glory of God. One thing that helps me to understand what this luminosity can look like – and it's just a metaphor – is what I saw and noticed when my wife was pregnant. When she was expecting our daughter, early on, in the first trimester before we could share the news with anyone, I noticed something a tiny bit different about her. And yes, it was her skin, it was a kind of subtle and almost imperceptible glow that I'd like to think I only noticed because I was pretty used to being around her and could sense that something was different.

I actually recognized this glow the next time Jo was pregnant before either of us actually knew she was expecting. Now, I'm not claiming any special powers, and I assure you that my man-eyes are as sensorial deficient as the next. Of course I'm not suggesting that to be pregnant, or to be a mother, is any more holy than to be a man, or to be someone who is unable or simply not called to have children. But it's a helpful metaphor for what indwelling and can look like on the surface.

Let's go back to the story: Moses was not pregnant. With Yahweh's help Moses pulled off some pretty good tricks, but

giving birth was not one of them. No, what Moses did was bear the glory of God. He was visibly changed, he was transfigured by his time with Yahweh, and he then carried in his face the radiance of the holy one.

Moses had had been up on the mountain for 40 days, so we should abandon the idea that this was a quick encounter with the divine, and think more along the lines of monastic silence and even endurance. Before Moses went up Mount Sinai, he and his people had of necessity been spending all their time and energy getting out of Egypt, escaping from bondage and then surviving in the wilderness. But the transformation of Moses was a part of the transformation of the Israelite people, to whom God would give instructions on how to live as a people: how to live in camp as a people on the move, but ultimately how to live with one another and with God in a covenant of mutual fidelity. There's something of a pivot that happens in those 40 days of prayer that take the Israelites from surviving on the run to establishing some ritual and ethical foundations for being the people of God. Moses, after his 40 days with God, returns to camp with the tablets of the law, inscribed by God, in his hands.

This idea of making the crucial shift from running for your life to a richer, more faithful community that can thrive and grow and deepen in relationship with God and one another, I think is so wonderful. Sometimes that is exactly what you need, and it's just great when it can happen, and this was the perfect time, as a people, to make that pivot together.

The people were completely and totally *not* on board with that idea. Moses came down from the mountain after 40 days, tablets of the law in hand, and what does he find? The

people have fashioned the golden calf. You know how this ends: Moses smashes the tablet, goes back up the hill, God writes the memo again, and Moses returns. So after this awful golden calf issue, the people are simply not able to see Moses in all his glory.

They could not bear to see it. They may have felt anger at Moses, or shame at their actions, or were so overcome with anxiety at being a people who did not yet have the permanent home they sought. We too have our own stuff that makes it difficult to impossible to see this kind of Glory for when we encounter it.

This idea of transfiguration, of becoming radiant in the presence of God, has a hard time making it past our rational filter. Sure, it's fine to read about Jesus doing it, he is the Son of God after all. Sure, it's fine to sing about angels on high, and great to belt out the Gloria on a Sunday, but the idea of a visible luminosity that can we see and that we can even emanate, that's just too much. But I want to tell you, that is a part of our faith.

Moses glowed not because he had a quick charismatic flash of eternity downloaded from the divine. He became filled with the glory of God through 40 days alone with his creator.

Think of it this way: Moses did not have a mountain top-experience at the top of that mountain. Not in the way we might think. He had an earthy, often silent, perhaps even lonely, uncertain, emotional, visionary, even humbled, experience in his 40 days with God. And *that* is where the glory came from.

This story of Moses, and of course the story of Jesus' transfiguration, gives us a taste of Glory. I hope you see not only the radiant spender of Jesus but also that the glory of God's presence is a gift that we can all experience.

We now pivot, still glowing in a sense, to our own 40 day fast. The season of lent will begin in just a few days. It is our time for intentional silence, for humility, for penitence, for simple quiet in the healing presence of God. This is the time for fasting, for giving up things that crowd out the sacred silence, for discovering the surprising spiritual gifts that come from abnegation for its own sake, of self-denial as one vital path towards the greater glory.

Today I am telling you to look at Moses' face, to lift that veil and know that yours, too, can be that luminous with the presence of God. But in just 72 hours, on Ash Wednesday, I will smudge ashes, burned from the palms of past liturgies, on your face and remind you of your earthiness, your mortality, and your sin.

When I place ash on your forehead, I will say, *remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return*. This will begin the 40-day walk to Easter, a time to clean out the cellars of our souls in order to make space for the resurrected one. It will begin with a reminder of our mortality and brokenness. We don't fully experience the resurrection without the passion and the penitence, and we cannot fully experience the penitence of lent without the call to repentance that comes on Ash Wednesday.

I'm not going to say "I hope you come to services this Wednesday." Instead I'm going to say, "I'll see you this Wednesday." We have three services here and a fourth downtown. I know that clergy no longer have the authority to say this, but I'm going to say it anyway: The Imposition of Ashes is not optional, any more than Christmas and Easter are optional observances. It is part of being a Christian who practices Lent. It is a part of being an Episcopalian. It is not something we wait to

start doing when we are grown up, or less busy: I grew up getting ashes every year of my childhood. I grew up Roman Catholic but the Episcopal practice is the same. I want you to come. I want you to help me teach you and your children that this is a day to be set aside as holy.

I want you to experience the ashes, because I want you ultimately to embody the Glory of God. Just as we don't fully experience Easter without Lent, the ashes themselves receive meaning from the very reality of Glory that we see today, in passages about radiance and transfiguration. The ashes will smudge the faces that are meant to shine in Glory.

We probably don't think much about Glory these days, but it's vital to living in the presence of God. We need glory, and today we see it. The glory that comes from prayer and devotion, from an openness born of desire for God's presence and faithfulness to God's movement, this is a radiance that is real. This is the glory of God made manifest on the very faces of the people of God.

The Rev. Bernard J. Owens
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