

The Descent of Divine Beauty

Opening

If you live in the east Tennessee valley, it doesn't take long before the Smoky Mountains to our south orient your vision. Traveling interstates and highways you glance at those old hills more often than you know. When I moved to Alabama for college, one of my triggers for homesickness was the absence of mountains on the horizon.

It's an involuntary reflex, a passing glance without thought most days. Some of these February mornings the white peaks cause us to gaze a little longer. Still better are the sunrises and sunsets in May and June when the Lord God bathes our mountains with golden light.

On a clear day you look for the heights of Mount Leconte on the horizon. It's quite a climb from Knoxville to the summit of Leconte. We're at 900 ft elevation in Knoxville and the summit of LeConte is 6,500 ft. Which is akin to the ascent from the Sea of Galilee looking toward Mount Hermon, only Mount Hermon rises to more than 9,000 ft at its peak.

Today we set out from daily life in the valley to make the steep ascent up the Mount of Transfiguration, which most scholars believe is Mount Hermon. You can reach Leconte's peak in one day if you move quickly. Not so with Mount Hermon. Our Lord had been with the twelve in a northern city, named for imperial power—Caesarea Philippi. Six days after their stay in Caesarea Philippi, Jesus leaves the crowds and the city, ascending Palestine's highest mountain.

There's significance both in the **timing** and the **elevation** of the ascent. Peter, James, and John are not only ascending Palestine's tallest peak, they will witness the summit of Israel's history from this mountaintop. The Lord God created the world in six days, resting from his completed work on the glory of the Sabbath. Moses was called up to witness God's glory after the cloud of God's presence covered the mountain for six days. Six days isn't a random number; it means that after day six, the glory of God is near.

Transfiguration in the Middle

Perhaps more than any other occasion in the New Testament, we find in the Transfiguration story the most visible example that our God is a God of beauty. “He wraps himself in light as with a garment.” “God is light and in him there is no darkness at all.”¹

Near the end of this episode, we see as the inner circle saw. They had seen Elijah and Moses with their own eyes and they knew it. God honored his faithful prophets Moses and Elijah, but they do not have the glory and honor due to Jesus alone. Moses was the Lawgiver, Elijah the greatest of Old Testament prophets, but they were shadows of the full reality—the reality of Jesus of Nazareth, the Word made flesh. When Elijah and Moses depart, the disciples saw “Jesus only.” Jesus only, radiant with the glory of God.

I suppose that’s what I’m seeking on this last Sunday of Epiphany: to seek the beauty that only Jesus reveals. There are depths to the transfiguration story that we will never fully plumb. Like a sun shining numerous rays, you may only be able to trace one light beam. The icon of the Transfiguration renders this truth so well. Christ’s beauty shines in all directions, reaching the corners of the earth, yet the three apostles can only see one light beam. That beam is like an arrow to their souls to behold Christ in his majesty.

In that spirit, I only want to trace one ‘light beam’ from this beautiful mystery. I trace that light beam with a question or two: why did he reveal his majesty in the middle of his ministry? Why would God glorify his Son *now* when the glory of his *crucified and resurrected body* would be revealed on Easter Sunday and another 49 days thereafter?

What Kind of Beauty?

Well we find a clue to those questions six days prior to that ascent. We return to the events at the base of Hermon in Caesarea Philippi. That is the place of Peter’s great confession when he professed that Jesus is the Christ. Immediately after that confession, Jesus began

¹ John 1.5

teaching the disciples how it will go for the Son of God: he will suffer many things, be rejected and killed, then rise again three days later.

You may remember that Peter presumptuously rebukes the man he just professed as Christ, rejecting the future Jesus prophesied for himself. Then Jesus gives an even more severe rebuke to Peter saying, “Get behind me, Satan! You don’t have the mind of God.” Jesus then gives the hard teaching to the twelve *and the crowds* that it’s impossible to follow him without self-denial and taking up one’s cross. That exchange happened six days before Jesus’ ascent up Mount Hermon with Peter, James, and John. Mark doesn’t record another event between these events.

So we’re meant to see that Peter, James, and John were pondering this strange and disturbing saying of Jesus about suffering, death, the cross *while they were ascending the mountain*. Six days to wrestle with that troubling, puzzling teaching about the the cross. And then they ascended Hermon’s dizzying heights. And, suddenly, Glory—glory as of the only Son from the Father. And the Father speaks “This is my Son; listen to Him.”

All three heard that voice, but it sure sounds like a direct address to Peter doesn’t it? “Listen to Him, Peter, when he speaks about his suffering and rejection, his death and resurrection.”

At the base of the mountain, Peter wanted to distance Jesus from shame and defeat. When glory comes over Mount Hermon, Peter doesn’t want to leave. “It is good that we are here!” he says. “Let’s stay!” He wants to stay in the place of glory and worship.

From the top of the mountain into its valley, Peter resembles the intense conflict that wars within our souls—we were made for beauty, yet we reject the cross. My goodness, it’s such an entrenched battle within our souls. The forces to flee pain are so strong within us, yet the longing for beauty is terribly strong, too. Our eyes are hungry to behold eternal beauty; our ears are closed to the command of the cross. We want the glory of God without suffering. When the grace and love of God seizes our hearts, you don’t want to leave. “It is good that I am here. Let’s stay!” /

Why *would* you leave? Why would *Jesus* decide to descend that mountain where the Father revealed his glory?

You ask that question and you glimpse what *kind* of beauty, what *kind* of glory that Jesus reveals. Being filled with the glory of God, full of the Father's love from all eternity, Jesus still chooses the cross. The cross was the Father's will, yes. Yet it was Jesus' own choice even when he was wrapped in light as with a garment. Though he was full of his Father's glory *before* the cross, still he chose the way of suffering, rejection, and death.

There's an ancient hymn on the Transfiguration, where saints praise our Lord Jesus with these words:

When (your disciples) behold You crucified, they (will) understand that Your suffering was voluntary, and will proclaim that You are truly the Radiance of the Father.²

That's the kind of glory Jesus revealed on Mount Hermon. Peter, James, and John can't comprehend it in that moment. They will only comprehend that kind of beauty *after* Jesus was raised from the dead. That's one reason why Jesus commands them to keep his transfiguration a secret. Don't misrepresent the glory I received from my Father; don't separate the glory of God from the cross and resurrection.

It is as if we can hear our Lord Jesus saying:

Today, you have seen my face shining with the uncreated light of God. Soon you will see men spit in my face. Blood will fall over my eyes from the crown of thorns placed over my head. A shroud will be wrapped around my head in my burial. But those linens will be neatly folded on the Day of Resurrection.

One theologian has said the secret message of this Transfiguration icon is that the Cross is already basking in the light of Easter morning.³ The glory of God is stronger than death. That

²Kontakion for The Feast of the Transfiguration

³Paul Evdokimov, *The Art of the Icon*.

is why we see Jesus, clothed in the majesty of God, freely choosing his passion, freely chose to *descend* the mountain.

On the other side of Easter, we can see that the glory of God radiates in Christ not only in the moment of his transfiguration, but leaving his glory on the mountain. Christ not only left eternal glory at his nativity, he left his glory when he descended the mountain and turned his face to Jerusalem.

The Glory of Free Will

In so doing, we see not only the glory of Jesus' love, we see healing. On the Mount of Transfiguration, Jesus heals the corruption of our free will, a disease that began in paradise. God created us with free will so that we would freely choose to abide in his love, to find all our desires, our loves, and our whole life fulfilled in Himself. Our free will was not meant to be a curse. God gave us free will so that our will would become a wellspring of our own beauty; that by choosing the will of God we would radiate his glory ourselves—in body, soul, and spirit.

It's on the other side of the mountain, the descent of the mountain, that Jesus heals the corruption of our free will that began in Paradise. Where Adam corrupted his free will, choosing his own glory which lead to death, Jesus redeemed our free will. He freely chose suffering, rejection, and death, though he was clothed in the Father's glory. That's the kind of beauty Jesus reveals: freely choosing the Father's will.

And what was the Father's will in sending his Son, full of glory, to the cross? Was it to deliver us from death? Yes, of course. But more. It was to restore the beauty with which he made male and female in his image and likeness. The writer of Hebrews says:

“For it was fitting that he, for whom and by whom all things exist, **in bringing many sons to glory**, should make the founder of their salvation perfect through suffering.” (Hebrews 2:10, ESV)

He died and rose again, not only so that we would escape death, but that many sons and daughters would be beautiful again. That, we, too, would be transfigured in our bodies with the glory of God.

We often shake our heads at Peter in the Gospels for the many foot-in-mouth moments he has. He was a young man then, an immature disciple. Hear him speak of the transfigured Christ as an older man, made mature by the cross, the empty tomb, and the indwelling Spirit of God:

“God’s divine power has granted to us all things that pertain to life and godliness, through the knowledge of him **who called us to his own glory and excellence**, by which he has granted to us his precious and very great promises, so that through them **you may become partakers of the divine nature**, having escaped from the corruption that is in the world because of sinful desire.” (2 Peter 1:3–4, ESV)

That is the will of God: that we become partakers of the divine glory again. And we see what that divine nature is having ascended the Mount of Transfiguration. It is freely choosing the will of God; it is laying down one’s life for one’s friends. Friends who saw his glory, but friends who fell asleep in Gethsemane. Friends who betrayed him three. Yes for these friends, and even his enemies, Christ died so that they (and we) may be redeemed, and being redeemed become partakers of the divine glory. So that we might be beautiful by grace as He is beautiful by nature. All for the glory of God who is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.