

“Who’s Glory?” CHC 2-7-16

Exodus 34:29-35

Luke 9:28-36

One of my favorite movies is “Chariots of Fire”. It tells the story of two athletes at the 1924 Paris Olympics. Harold Abrams, after a major struggle as much against himself as his competitors, achieves the gold medal in the 100 meters.

Eric Liddell, a devout Scottish Christian, refuses to run the race against Abrams because that particular race is scheduled on Sunday. As a result, Liddell switches events and wins the gold medal in the 400 meters.

After the Olympic Games finish, the film shows the athletes returning on the boat and train to London, spilling out into Waterloo station. All are present except Abrams. It is only when the crowds have gone that Harold emerges, slowly walking off the train. Abrams has achieved the ultimate experience for an athlete. Holding the long-coveted prize in his hand, his goals fulfilled, he has been to the mountain top. Standing there on the platform, he realizes that whatever he does now, he will never be in this place again. Down from the heights, reality stares him in the face.

Have you ever been there? I recall the birth of our firstborn twins. Unaware that there are actually two bodies in the womb, which three doctors missed detecting, a second one appears. I will never forget that moment, when after our first daughter is born, the doctor says, “There is another one in there”. Betty looks up at me and is certain that she sees fear in my eyes. My recollection is, “Wow! I didn’t expect this to happen”. I do recall Betty, the practical, responsible one, looking at me and saying, “How can we afford this?” That is the last thing I am thinking about. It is, after all, the mountain top of the childbirth experience.

The babies, being a month premature, must be taken to Denver Children’s Hospital. Before they are to leave, the nurse brings the two girls to greet us and carries them away. That is a difficult moment. Reality shows its face. Halfway in denial, we think, “This really happened. We really are parents now. Will our girls be okay?” The high of the birth is over.

Luke tells us about a very different mountain top experience. Let me say first that spiritual insight and transformation don’t just happen. Focused listening, often through disappointments and struggle, coupled with ongoing dialogue, conversation about our feelings and responses as well as prayer are God’s way of leading and forming our lives and souls. But often the mountain top experience, those times of profound insight and experience, come along as part of our spiritual formation.

Luke chapter 9 gives us a glimpse of some of the components of this journey. Early in the chapter the disciples are given divine power and authority to cast out demons and cure disease. They are told to go out on faith, trusting God’s provisions along the way. Hostile and receptive responses will be part of the package. Their success prompts Herod’s curiosity. He tries to meet Jesus.

After returning from their journey Jesus pulls them together to debrief and spend time with him in a remote, private place. After their experiences with God's power of healing, nothing will stop the crowds from seeking Jesus and the disciples out. They find them. So Jesus takes advantage of their presence to teach them about the kingdom of God, taking time to heal those who are sick and need to be cured as well.

At the end of the day the disciples tell Jesus to send them away. Jesus says no. "It is late and we are in a deserted place and there is no place to go. You feed them". They are incredulous. "Are you kidding Jesus? Where can we go to buy food? We are in the middle of nowhere. All we have are five fish and two loaves of bread". So Jesus instructs them to have the people sit down in groups of fifty. He prays, blesses the food and all are served. And there are leftovers. Isn't that the way with God's blessings?

Next we find Jesus praying with them. Notice the emphasis on prayer? Jesus asks them, "Who do the crowds say I am?" They fumble about. "Well, John the Baptist, Elijah, an ancient prophet who has arisen". He gets more personal. "Who do you say that I am?" Ultimately we all have to answer that question. But it is Peter who responds, "The Messiah of God". At that point Jesus announces for the first time his purpose on this earth and how things are going to go. "Here's what's going to happen. Keep it to yourselves. I only want you to know. The Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, chief priests, and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised". That's a game changer!

That being the case, Jesus draws forth the implications. "If you follow me you must lose your life to find it, take up your cross daily and follow me, and by the way, what does it prophesy if you gain the whole world but lose your soul?"

Eight days after these events I have described we again find Jesus praying on a mountain, having taken James, John, and Peter with him. During this prayer Jesus' face changes and his clothes turn dazzling white. Then Moses and Elijah appear. Each represents the face of a significant piece of Israel's history and identity. Moses is the face of the law. Elijah is the face of the prophets. The Law and the Prophets, symbolically represented in these two personalities, are standing on the Mount of Transfiguration with Jesus and his inner circle of disciples. They are discussing Jesus' aforementioned departure from this earth and what he is about to accomplish in Jerusalem. During this conversation, Peter, James and John are in that state of sleep deprivation and somewhat groggy, as Luke describes, "heavy with sleep".

In that half-awake state, as if rising from a dream, they see Jesus' glory along with Elijah and Moses. Just as the departure of these men is occurring Peter blurts out to Jesus, "Master, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah", and as Luke tells us, "not knowing what he said".

While Peter is babbling on, a cloud overshadows them. They are terrified. I am certain that Peter finally stops talking. They hear a voice, "This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!"

There they stand, alone with Jesus, being treated to a vision of the consummation of the Kingdom, with Jesus in his glory. The experience silences them.

Mountain top experiences are special moments or events that renew and give us strength, often to prepare us for the challenges that we will have to face. Such is the case here. We welcome them for the graces that they are, but they cannot continue indefinitely nor be kept in a bottle.

Life often brings to us that juxtaposition of glory and reality. The Transfiguration, in our lives those moments of shining faces and landscapes, offer a promise and glimpse of the glory on the other side. They encourage, focus, strengthen, and energize us to continue the journey of faith and life.

Frederick Buechner frames it this way: "If I were called upon to state in a few words the essence of everything I was trying to say both as a novelist and as a preacher, it would be something like this: Listen to your life. See it for the fathomless mystery that it is. In the boredom and pain of it no less than the excitement and gladness: touch, taste, smell your way to the holy and hidden heart of it because in the last analysis all moments are key moments, and life itself is grace" (Haase, "Saying Yes", p.52).

The meaning of Jesus' words and actions often elude us and seem hidden to our understanding. Other times we lack the categories of meaning to make sense of them. We see this in the disciples as they seek to break through their conventional perspectives of God and grasp who Jesus is, as well as his message of salvation and social reversal. "Who do you say that I am?" I suspect that we are all still working out that question within the fabric of our lives.

We miss a lot in life because we don't pay attention. Prejudice may blind us. Mental lethargy, our unwillingness to examine our doubts, to take seriously the claims and implications of following Jesus, or our refusal to respond to God's nudges and leadings, each of these things stall forward movement in our faith formation. Sometimes it is our affluence and love of ease along with our well-constructed defense mechanisms keeping the muscle of faith arrested.

God does not make the path of faith easy. That is why Jesus tells us to be persistent in pursuit of his person and truth. "For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened...For the gate is narrow and the road is hard that leads to life, and there are few who find it"(Matthew 7:8,14).

God may use sorrow to awaken us to his love and grace. When something or someone breaks our heart, through the tears God's glory may appear. A sense of need, an unsolvable problem, an unanswered question, an overpowering temptation, or an opportunity to do something beyond our perceived ability creates the possibility for God to reach and set us on the path of love and salvation.

After we experience these moments of glory there is always the next day. Abrams stands on that platform unsure of where his life will go next. For some of us those moments of glory we touch may become fixed in time, arresting further growth in our lives. However, there is always the next day, asking us to act on that insight, that new awareness, or that moment's encounter with God's grace.

The disciples had their next day and it wasn't pretty. They come down the mountain and meet a man in the crowd begging Jesus to heal his only son. "I begged your disciples to cast it out but they could not".

Jesus has his frustration with the reality of the next day as well. "You faithless and perverse generation, how much longer must I be with you and bear with you?" Only then does he ask for the man to bring his son to be healed. Then, while all are amazed at the glory of God, Jesus brings his purpose back into their awareness. "Let these words sink into your ears: the Son of Man is going to be betrayed into human hands". It will become a constant refrain. Not a soul understands him or perceives the meaning of his words.

In the end, J. Heinrich Arnold is right; "Christian discipleship is not a question of our own doing; it is a matter of making room for God so that he can live in us" (Yancey, "Grace Notes", p.244).

As we receive our Lord's invitation to partake of his life this morning, we come recognizing that through all of life's moments God is speaking to each of us. We may or may not understand or perceive what God is saying all of the time, but we come in faith, seeking, asking, and knocking, finding ways to make room for God so that God can live in us. As Buechner aptly reflects, "in the last analysis all moments are key moments, and life itself is grace". Let us receive God's grace.