

Enter the Cloud

David A. Baer

Transfiguration (C)
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Text: Luke 9:28-36

Once when I was in college I went to eat at the dining hall with a group of my friends. In the process of loading up our trays we got separated, and so as I came out of the serving line into the dining room I looked around and spotted my friend Megan across the room. Now, the dining room was packed with tables and chairs, and so I put my head down and kept my eyes on my tray as I wove my way through them and settled in across from my friend. I launched right into telling her all about my day as I began to eat, and then at some point I got self-conscious about talking too much and stopped and said, "So, Megan, what's up with you?"

"I'm not Megan," said the woman sitting across from me. I looked up, and blimey, she was right! There was a slight resemblance, and it was easy to see how I could have made the mistake, looking at her from across the room, but this was not my friend, and on top of it all, she probably thought I was a dangerous lunatic. I apologized and beat a hasty retreat to find my friends, looking more closely this time to make sure my eyes weren't fooling me. Sometimes appearances can be deceiving.

Our gospel lesson today is a story about what happened when Jesus went on a mountaintop prayer retreat. We know from Luke's story that Jesus had the habit of praying late into the night, and so it's no surprise that the three disciples he brought with him—Peter, James, and John—start to get groggy. And while they're yawning and rubbing their eyes, they begin to see some funny things. The appearance of Jesus' face changes, and his clothes become a dazzling white. Moses and Elijah appear with him, the story says "in glory."

Now, I've always taken their word for it. I've always thought that if Peter and James and John say Jesus was transfigured, that he was there talking with Moses and Elijah, that's good enough for me. They saw what they saw, and they were there—they should know what happened. But this week I read a different take from Thomas Martin, a professor of religion at Susquehanna University, who says we shouldn't be so quick to give these disciples the benefit of the doubt. After all, they are constantly misunderstanding everything Jesus says and does, and Jesus has to keep correcting them.

And when I went back and read the story closely, it does seem to focus on what the disciples perceived and observed. "The *appearance* of his face changed," it says. "They saw two men, Moses and Elijah." "They saw his glory and the two men who stood with him." And whatever was actually happening, the way Peter responds—proposing to construct three tents—is presented as being a completely boneheaded scheme: the story tells us in so many words that he didn't know what he was saying. And then God yells at him from out of a cloud. So it's pretty clear that whatever was really happening, Peter must have missed something important. He misperceived it, or at least misinterpreted what he saw. So I want to see what we might be able to learn if we take our cue from Professor Martin this morning and approach the first half of the story—the

part that talks about what the sleepy disciples saw, or thought they saw—with some healthy skepticism. Because the truth about who Jesus is that we're meant to take away from today's lesson isn't to be found in the shining vision, but in the cloud that follows.

What the disciples see is a vision of glory. That word is used twice in this gospel lesson, but the Old Testament is full of stories that show God's glory. When the ancient Israelites uttered the word "glory," or *kavod* in Hebrew, they meant the great and terrible power and grandeur of God's presence. They sensed this presence in the awesome forces that shake and crackle through the natural world. The Exodus story tells us that the *kavod* of the Lord was like a cloud of fire, a ferocious lightning cloud that settled on the mountain where God handed down the commandments. In our Old Testament lesson today, we heard about Moses going up a different mountain and coming back so bright that the people could hardly stand it, and so he wore a veil when he wasn't communicating God's message to them. Glory is the unmistakable, revealed presence of God shining for all to see.

But glory isn't just about God. Luke's gospel also talks about glory in the human sense. When the devil tempts Jesus with the promise of earthly power, he shows Jesus all the kingdoms of the world, and promises to give Jesus "their glory and all this authority," if Jesus will bow down and worship the devil. Glory is about power. It's about victory over enemies. Glory means security, invulnerability, authority in the human realm as well as the divine.

And it's in imagining that Jesus is a glorious Messiah, Professor Martin says, that the disciples get it wrong. What they think they see is Jesus ready to claim his throne, flanked by the authority of the Law and the Prophets represented by Moses and Elijah. What they think they see is Jesus blazing forth for all the world to behold, so that no one needs faith, no one needs to trust and believe that God's kingdom has arrived, because of the overwhelming power and force of Jesus' divine presence. I mean, come on! Who wouldn't confess Jesus as the Son of God, if they saw him lit up like a Christmas tree on top of a mountain with two of the prophets returned from the dead? What the disciples imagine is a Jesus who comes to overpower and conquer the world through divine majesty.

But the disciples themselves ought to have known better. Because they not only have eyes but ears, and here it's their ears that would have brought them closer to the truth: Jesus was speaking, after all with Moses and Elijah about "his departure, which he was about to accomplish at Jerusalem." Perhaps if they had distrusted their eyes and relied on their ears, they might have heard Jesus talking about what was going to happen in Jerusalem—his costly sacrifice on the cross, his burial in the tomb, his rising in secret three days later. Jesus is not here to overthrow the world's death-dealing powers by force, but to give himself into their hands. He fulfills the scriptures not as a glorious Messiah, but as a suffering servant Messiah. The disciples ought to have used their ears, instead of their eyes.

The cloud brings a speedy end to the glorious vision, and it brings terror and confusion to the disciples, who are so used to relying on their eyes. But they ought to have used their ears. And the voice of God, speaking from the cloud, confirms this: "This is my Son, my Chosen," God says. "Listen to him!" Don't look at him! Don't use your eyes, so easily bedazzled with visions of power and splendor—but *listen* to him! Listen to my Son! He's the one I've chosen, the one to whom I've entrusted my kingdom.

We've taken this message to heart in our Presbyterian Reformed tradition. The Westminster Larger Catechism, part of our Book of Confessions, denounces as a violation of the Second Commandment "the making any representation of God, of all,

or of any of the three Persons, either inwardly in our mind, or outwardly in any kind of image or likeness of any creature whatsoever” (Q. 109). We don’t follow that perfectly, as you can see by just looking at the stained glass depiction of Jesus behind me. On the other hand, we don’t direct our worship to that image either. It’s there to tell a story about Jesus as the Good Shepherd, not to stand in for Jesus. But reading today’s lesson, you get a feel for why it can be such a problem to look at Jesus instead of listen to him. When we create a picture about Jesus, we tend to make him in our image—he’s got northern European, not Mediterranean, skin tones here, doesn’t he? (And am I imagining this, or is he in fact blond?) Like those three disciples, we import our own priorities and values when we try to figure out what we see when we look at Jesus, and it’s all too easy to be led astray from what Jesus teaches and does.

The people who first followed Jesus, who spoke with him face-to-face, left behind *nothing* about his appearance—no paintings, no sculptures, not even any descriptions, the way you get with some other important figures in the Bible. What they left us was his *words* and the story of his life, a story that leads not to an earthly throne but to a cross. They left us the meal we’re about to share around Christ’s Table, not a representation of what Christ looked like, but a reminder of his sacrificial love that gathered a new earthly body and sustains it to this very day. If our tradition has tried through the years to forbid us from representing Christ for people’s eyes, maybe it’s because we’re supposed to represent Christ with our words and actions.

“[A] cloud came and overshadowed them,” the story says, “and they were terrified as they entered the cloud.” God mercifully disrupts the misleading vision of the disciples, even though it doesn’t feel like mercy at the time. They are frightened, disoriented. They don’t know what’s coming next. What they had seen—or thought they had seen—was a plan for glory and victory all laid out. Now they couldn’t see anything. How many of us have felt something similar, when the plan for our lives we thought we had seen melts and dissolves, and we lose our bearings? But into this cloud God speaks these words as reassurance: “This is my Son, my chosen. Listen to him!” As we enter the fog of our uncertain lives, Jesus walks with us, speaking to us, teaching us what it means to trust and follow, to have faith that God’s love is forever, and that God’s sun will rise on the darkest night we might face. Jesus walks with us, his words and his example showing us what it means to set ourselves aside in faith, not grasping at glory but carrying our cross, bearing one another’s burdens in love.

O God, when misleading visions bedazzle us, disrupt our false sight. When we lose our way, speak to us in the voice of your Son, and by your Spirit open our ears to listen to your Chosen. Lead us with trust and love through the darkness of the grave, and into life eternal with you. Amen.