

Overwhelmed

The Rev. Dr. Scott Ramsey
Exodus 24:12-18; Matthew 17:1-9
Lewinsville Presbyterian Church
Transfiguration Sunday – February 19, 2023

“Moses went up on the mountain, and the cloud covered the mountain. The glory of the Lord settled on Mount Sinai, and the cloud covered it for six days. The appearance of the glory of the Lord was *like a devouring fire* on the top of the mountain in the sight of the people of Israel.”

“Jesus took with him Peter and James and John and led them up a high mountain, by themselves. And he was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became dazzling white. Suddenly a bright cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud a voice said, ‘This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!’ When the disciples heard this, they fell to the ground and were overcome by fear.”

Our two texts today, our two remarkable texts today, speak to us of the experience of *being overwhelmed*, which is an experience with which many of us can identify. Theologian and biblical scholar David Ford has written that life in our time means dealing with “multiple overwhelmings.”¹

What in your life do you find overwhelming? We can be overwhelmed by the demands that are placed on our time and on our attention. We can be overwhelmed by the pressures that are placed on us, to succeed and perform and achieve and prove our value and earn our way into a school, or a team, or a group. We can be overwhelmed by the pain and the grief and the troubles of our planet. The earthquakes in Turkey and Syria. The train derailment and chemical emergency in East (Pal-uh-steen) Palestine, Ohio. The fentanyl and opioid crisis that is shredding entire communities. Gun violence and ferocious hostility between groups. We can all add our own items to this list.

In the midst of the many ways that we can feel overwhelmed by the events of our lives, Transfiguration Sunday – this Sunday before we begin the season of Lent - invites us to allow ourselves to be overwhelmed by God. Transfiguration Sunday speaks to us of the *glory of God* which comes upon us and leaves us in awe at the transformative beauty of God. When we talk about God’s glory, we are in a slightly different register than the register of morality, or ethics, or guidelines for what we should do. God’s glory affects all of those, but it is somewhat different.

¹ David Ford, *The Shape of Our Living*, p. 18.

God's glory is one of those things that we actually talk quite a bit about, but we don't always think very much about it. During the communion liturgy we sing, "Holy, holy, holy Lord, God of power and might; heaven and earth are full of your glory, hosanna in the highest." We are proclaiming that the earth is, somehow, filled with the glory of the Lord right now. So glory can fill a space.

"Glory" is something that can be given. We can give glory to someone else. We say, "To God alone be all the glory." "Glory be to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Ghost." Glory is something that can be given and received, like honor and praise, though we must be careful about to whom we give glory, and we must be even more careful about wanting to receive glory. When we find ourselves wanting to receive glory for something, we are beginning to want something that is perhaps best left to God. We all like to be admired and praised, but glory can very quickly go to your head.

In the Scriptures, 'glory' has an almost tangible quality. In the reading from Exodus, "Moses went up on the mountain, and the glory settled on Mount Sinai." The glory of the Lord is mysterious, like a cloud, and you can almost see it. The Hebrew word for 'glory' actually means 'heavy,' so that when we talk about the glory of God, we're talking about something with weighty substance, that must not be trifled with.

In the story from Matthew, Peter, James, and John – the trio who are stand-ins here for the entire discipleship community – go with Jesus up on a mountain, where Jesus is transfigured – the Greek word is that he undergoes a metamorphosis – and he shines with radiance. The glory of God is radiating forth from Jesus, as he stands right there, in front of our trio. These three guys are living out the opening verses of the Gospel of John, where it says, "we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth." Peter, James, and John are seeing the glory of God right in front of their eyes.

It's interesting to observe their reaction. Matthew tells us that when the disciples took in the full glory of God in the person of Jesus, they fell to the ground, overcome by fear. They were terrified. They were overwhelmed.

They were overwhelmed by God.

We are preparing to begin the season of Lent on Ash Wednesday this week. Lent is a season of repentance and humility; it is a season of purification and cleansing and walking with Jesus to the cross. As we prepare to enter the season of Lent, friends, we are invited to allow ourselves to be overwhelmed by God.

And here's why this is important. The reason to allow God's presence and God's grace and God's holiness and God's love to overwhelm you is to allow your life to be rearranged and reprioritized. The rest of the world would believe that God is not a real and active agent in the world, that it's up to you to fix your life, to get your life

together. The world will tell you that, at most, God is a pretty ornament to hang on a life that is otherwise organized around trying to get by and get ahead.

But friends, we were not created to get by and to get ahead in the world. We were created to glorify God and to enjoy God forever. We were created to live in beloved community. We were created for neighborly compassion and solidarity with the poor, all of which give glory to God. We were created to organize our lives around the voice that proclaims to Jesus and to each one of us, "You are my Beloved, with you I am well pleased."

The season of Lent is bracketed by the overwhelming glory of Transfiguration Sunday on one end, and the overwhelming glory of Easter Sunday on the other. We are sent into Lent by the overwhelming radiance of God today, and on the other side of Lent, when Jesus emerges from the tomb, we will encounter the overwhelming radiance of the resurrection.

Transfiguration Sunday is the announcement that there are dimensions to reality, dimensions to our life with God, that cannot be contained. They cannot be contained by our theological categories or by our ethical codes of behavior or by our little slogans that we use to explain how the world works. With God, we are dealing with the Great Beyond. We are dealing with beauty and mystery and transcendence and power and authority and grace and awe. We are not meant to understand all of this. We are meant to be overwhelmed by it. We are meant to stand before God and before life, in all of God's overwhelming grace and in all of life's overwhelming mystery and be in awe.

In our lives, there are so many places where we can encounter the overwhelming presence of God. One of those places is here in the sanctuary. While God's presence is by no means contained in the sanctuary, there is a real sense that when we walk through those doors, we are entering another kind of space, another realm. We encounter God's glory through music in this space. We can encounter God's presence through art. We encounter God's presence and God's glory in nature, in both the beautiful aspects of nature and in the terrifying aspects. We encounter God's presence in our private times of prayer and quiet. With the eyes of faith, we can encounter God's presence in our daily interactions, and in our daily activities. The 20th century Roman Catholic monk Thomas Merton wrote of standing in Louisville, Kentucky, at the corner of 4th and Walnut, where he says, "I was suddenly overwhelmed with the realization that I loved all these people, that they were mine and I theirs, that we could not be alien to one another even though we were total strangers. It was like waking from a dream of separateness...it cannot be explained. There is no way of telling people that they are all walking around shining like the sun."²

² Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, pp. 153-155.

As you prepare to enter the season of Lent, this season of spiritual reorganization and reprioritization, this season of repentance and purification, know that you are not making this journey on your own. It's not all up to you. You are making the Lenten journey as part of this community of faith, here at Lewinsville, which is one small part of the global fellowship of the church. And we are making this journey in the overwhelming presence of God, revealed in Jesus Christ, by the power of the Holy Spirit, whose radiant presence walks with you every step of your way. To God and to God alone be ... all the glory. Amen.