

Liberating Love: Glimpsing Glory - Seeing Beyond

Sermon by Jan Wiersma

Community Presbyterian Church - Rochester, Minnesota

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Texts: Exodus 33 and Deuteronomy 34 (adapted); Matthew 22:15-22; 34-40

SCRIPTURE READING Exodus 33 and Deuteronomy 34 (adapted)

God told Moses that an angel would lead the people into the Promised Land, saying, "I will not go with you, for my wrath would consume this stiff-necked people." But again Moses interceded, and again God relented, and said, "My presence will go with you, and I will give you rest." And Moses said, "Show me your glory, I pray." And God said, "I will make all my goodness pass before you, and will proclaim to you the name, 'I AM WHO I WILL BE.' I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will show mercy on whom I will show mercy. But you cannot see my face, for no one shall see me and live." And God covered Moses in the cleft of a rock while the glory passed by; for God said, "You shall see my back, but my face shall not be seen."

When the 40 years of wilderness wandering had been completed, and the Israelites had received the law of healing love, and had suffered much, and learned much, I AM prepared at last to bring them into the land promised to their ancestors. And they made camp in Moab on the eastern bank of the Jordan River and received from Moses God's final instructions before entering the land.

Then Moses went up from the plains of Moab to Mount Nebo, to the top of Pisgah, which is opposite Jericho, and the Lord showed him the whole land. Then I AM said to him, "This is the land of which I swore to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, saying, 'I will give it to your descendants'; I have let you see it with your eyes, but you shall not cross over there."

Then Moses, servant and prophet of IAM, died there in the land of Moab. He was buried in a valley in the land of Moab, opposite Beth-peor, but no one knows his burial place to this day. Moses was one hundred twenty years old when he died; his sight was unimpaired and his vigor had not abated. The Israelites wept for Moses in the plains of Moab thirty days; then the period of mourning for Moses was ended. Never since has there arisen a prophet in Israel like Moses.

Mt 22:15-22; 34-40

As the plot to get rid of Jesus thickened, both temple parties stepped up their efforts to make him convict himself with his own words. Jesus saw through their schemes and thwarted their plotting.

Then the Pharisees went and plotted to entrap him in what he said. So they sent their disciples to him, along with the Herodians, saying, "Teacher, we know that you are sincere, and teach the way of God in accordance with truth, and show deference to no one; for you do not regard people with partiality [incidentally, quite an accurate description of Jesus!]. Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?" But Jesus, aware of their malice, said, "Why are you putting me to the test, you hypocrites? Show me the coin used for the tax." And they brought him a denarius. Then he said to them, "Whose head is this, and whose title?" They answered, "The emperor's." Then he said to them, "Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's." When they heard this, they were amazed; and they left him and went away.

The Saducees also, who did not believe in the resurrection as the Pharisees did, tried to stump him with a trick question about marriage in the hereafter. He returned this volley, too, with ease, and the crowds were astonished.

When the Pharisees heard that he had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together, and one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to test him. “Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?” He said to him, “‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.” Keep these words in your heart: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. TBTG

One of the greatest gifts I have received in my life was *nearly* having a near-death experience. I was living in the mountains of Crete. When I got sick, every day for a week I descended further into delirium, or ascended further toward heaven, depending on how you look at it. Someday I’ll tell you the whole story, if you like; for now, I’ll just say my spirit crossed a sort of continental divide between this life and the next, and I found myself looking toward the hills of heaven with a serene sort of joy. I wanted to be buried high above the village in a cemetery that burst out in daisies every spring, and overlooked the blue Mediterranean. I cried when they hauled me off to the hospital. After ten days there, I was strong enough to lift my head from my pillow just high enough to see, yes, the tops of the mountains from the other side. From this side of life. How close I came to dying, I really don’t know. I didn’t get to cross over the divide into heaven then. Moses didn’t get to cross the Jordan into the earthly Promised Land; he was enfolded into the greater life of God. I say my experience was a gift, not because I lived (though on the whole I’m grateful), but because of my glimpse of glory. Like Moses, I got to see beyond - beyond my own tiny life with its puny strength and its willful desires masquerading as needs. Seeing not the face of God (for no one can see that and live), but the tiniest glimmer of the other side. The veil was lifted. Another word for that is *apocalypse*. Unveiling. Seeing beyond. Glimpsing glory.

In my mind, we stand today on a continental divide, in the midst of a minor apocalypse. The combined predicaments of global pandemic, racial inequity, bitter politics, and changing climate have ripped away the illusion of security and prospering and laid our human disasters out in full view. Churches are bleeding numbers; the survival of democracy is in question; panic has given way to depression. Our courage and imagination seem insufficient to face an uncertain future.

In the midst of this, we get Jesus’ puzzling little exchange with the Pharisees about taxes. To pay or not to pay, they asked? This was the imperial tax, the money that the oppressed had to pay, ironically, to support the military machine of the oppressor. Look at a denarius: see the image of the false Roman god, the emperor. Simply touching this coin was enough to contaminate a good Jew. But look how small it is, how trivial; how useless, really. You can’t eat it, or wear it, or make music with it, or take shelter under it. Money itself is simply an idea that only has the power you give it, kind of like the stock market, or bitcoin. It is not God. Jesus says, let Caesar have his illusion of power and control, and give your *self* to God who holds you in life, in

relationship, in love, in harmony, peace, and beauty. And look past the illusory powers of this world to what lies beyond: which is nothing less than glory. And it may be closer than you think.

In Tolkien's delightful tale *The Hobbit*, prequel to *The Lord of the Rings* (and by the way, not much like the movie by that name), Bilbo Baggins and the company of dwarves are midway to their goal of finding the dragon and claiming its hoard of stolen treasure. They are bogged down in the middle of the dark and dangerous forest of Mirkwood and they send Bilbo up to the top of the tallest tree they can find to see if he can see the end of the forest. He cannot, and they groan: "This forest goes on forever and forever." In the despair that snatches at any hope of hope, they leave the path - a move that nearly proves disastrous. What they hadn't realized is that Bilbo's tree stands at the bottom of a broad valley, whose sides rise gently all around; just beyond, the forest ends. In fact, they're near the end, but they can't see beyond the trees in front of them. I've noticed a similar phenomenon on a lake in a canoe. When I push off, I can see the fire tower up high on the far side of the lake quite clearly; as I paddle toward it, the opposite bank rises up in front of me to hide it. Life is clearer from a distance, as mountains are clearer from the plain.

Jesus saw beyond the power implicit in the coin of the realm to the true power that outlasts all human realms. He had the courage and imagination to face down the plotters and accusers who saw only what was right in front of them. Do we have the courage and imagination to face down the disease of fear whose symptoms seem to have the world spinning off its axis? Are we able to see beyond? To get a glimpse of glory? It's so close - maybe even closer than you think.

You have all been so gracious in following with me God's history of liberating love, with Moses and the Israelites: challenging empire, remembering mercy, learning to trust, practicing the presence of God, receiving laws that heal, changing directions. We've learned a little bit about how this narrative became foundational in the freedom quest of African Americans - a quest that's far from over, whose depth and dimensions are still unfolding before us, to our horror and our shame. Their quest is not over; we are part of it. We share one world, one future with all of humankind, and all of creation; it is past time to learn this.

The work Moses began also extended far beyond his own lifetime. Some call it a pity or a punishment that Moses died before reaching the Promised Land; I call it a gift of God that he was able to glimpse God's glory, a glory that extended far beyond the Jordan, beyond the Mediterranean, maybe far into the future. The Israelites had the messy and discouraging business of conquest still ahead of them; Moses left that to his lieutenant, Joshua. Moses had the benefit of the view from the mountain. Do you ever wonder about Jesus' view from the cross? Did he glimpse the work that would extend far beyond his disciples' lives, maybe even as far as today, 2000 years in the future? Did he trust others to finish the work of God on earth? Or did he wonder, foreseeing Christianity's errors and wrong turns? I don't know, but I do know he left his disciples with the promise, "See, I am with you always, even to the end of the world."

If we feel lost and in the midst of endless night, stranded in a menacing forest that seems to go on forever and forever; if we feel the security we've staked our lives on may be broken beyond repair, this too is a gift of God: an apocalypse, an unveiling, inviting us to look beyond our own tiny lives and puny strength, and our willful desires masquerading as needs. I'll leave you with this story about Howard Thurman, 20th century mystic and teacher, and pastor to the heroes of the Civil Rights Movement: "When Thurman was a small boy, he saw an elder, a man who must have been in his eighties, who was planting pecan trees. And young Thurman raised a question. He said, 'Sir, you're not gonna be around. You will not live long enough to taste the fruit from these trees.' And the old man paused and said, 'Son, all my life I've been eating from trees I did not plant. It's my job to plant for somebody else.'" ¹

We, too, have eaten from trees we didn't plant. We have received our church, our faith and our very lives from those who came before us. This is the seventh Sunday of contemplating God's liberating love. Stop, rest, look, and listen to your own heart. Listen for the same voice that spoke to Moses from a bush that burned but was never burned up. And may God, the great I AM, who IS from everlasting to everlasting, prosper the work of your hands. Amen. TBTG

Prayers

God, our Beloved, from everlasting to everlasting you are with us, never changing yet always new, replenishing hope, offering life, forgiving our sins and our slacking off, and opening a new eternity just beyond our present, a glimpse of glory. Help us to see beyond this present darkness and gaze toward your eternal light.

When we are overwhelmed by fire and storm, virus and vitriol, cruelty and callousness, remind us that if we only lift our eyes to you, we will see a better way--to follow in the footsteps of your Son, the Christ of creation, who lived with and loved the most burdened of his world,

God of abundance, as crops are gathered and food is stored, remind us that what you provide is plenty for all, when we share what we have and follow Jesus' generosity. Let us remember that we are not alone on earth, and not the only inheritors of your heaven.

We hold close to our hearts those already named and those dear to this congregation, asking you to hear our plea for healing.

And yet, we remember too that life's ending brings us face to face with the glory we only glimpse from afar until then; and so, when this short life is swallowed up in your larger light and life, may we greet you as our oldest and most faithful friend; for you have promised to welcome us in the name of Jesus who taught us to pray, "Our Father, who art in heaven...."

¹ From Krista Tippett's interview with Otis Moss III, in the *On Being* online newsletter, 10-17-20.