



Beholders the Beauty of God



The Collect

O God, who on the holy mount revealed to chosen witnesses your well-beloved Son, wonderfully transfigured, in raiment white and glistening: Mercifully grant that we, being delivered from the disquietude of this world, may by faith behold the King in his beauty; who with you, O Father, and you, O Holy Spirit, lives and reigns, one God, for ever and ever. *Amen.*

First Reading *Exodus 34:29-35*

Moses came down from Mount Sinai. As he came down from the mountain with the two tablets of the covenant in his hand, Moses did not know that the skin of his face shone because he had been talking with God. When Aaron and all the Israelites saw Moses, the skin of his face was shining, and they were afraid to come near him. But Moses called to them; and Aaron and all the leaders of the congregation returned to him, and Moses spoke with them. Afterward all the Israelites came near, and he gave them in commandment all that the Lord had spoken with him on Mount Sinai. When Moses had finished speaking with them, he put a veil on his face; but whenever Moses went in before the Lord to speak with him, he would take the veil off, until he came out; and when he came out, and told the Israelites what he had been commanded, the



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Israelites would see the face of Moses, that the skin of his face was shining; and Moses would put the veil on his face again, until he went in to speak with him.

Epistle *2 Peter 1:13-21*

I think it right, as long as I am in this body, to refresh your memory, since I know that my death will come soon, as indeed our Lord Jesus Christ has made clear to me. And I will make every effort so that after my departure you may be able at any time to recall these things.

For we did not follow cleverly devised myths when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we had been eyewitnesses of his majesty. For he received honor and glory from God the Father when that voice was conveyed to him by the Majestic Glory, saying, "This is my Son, my Beloved, with whom I am well pleased." We ourselves heard this voice come from heaven, while we were with him on the holy mountain.

So we have the prophetic message more fully confirmed. You will do well to be attentive to this as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts. First of all you must understand this, that no prophecy of scripture is a matter of one's own interpretation, because no prophecy ever came by human will, but men and women moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God.

Gospel *Luke 9:28-36*

Jesus took with him Peter and John and James, and went up on the mountain to pray. And while he was praying, the appearance of his face changed, and his clothes became dazzling white. Suddenly they saw two men, Moses and Elijah, talking to him. They appeared in glory and were speaking of his departure, which he was about to accomplish at Jerusalem. Now Peter and his companions were weighed down with sleep; but since they had stayed awake, they saw his glory and the two men who stood with him. Just as they were leaving him, Peter said 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" —not knowing what he said. While he was saying this, a cloud came and overshadowed them; and they were terrified as they entered the cloud. Then from the cloud came a voice that said, "This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!" When the voice had spoken, Jesus was found alone. And they kept silent and in those days told no one any of the things they had seen.



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I have been waiting for the privilege of standing in this pulpit for some time. Thank you for giving me the opportunity to serve.

Last week, my family and I had the chance to take a short vacation to Lake Lanier. It was perfect; all that we needed: time to do nothing but float along on the *warm* water, play with the kids and their growing collection of rocks by a small island just beyond the cove where we were staying, and let the gentle summer breeze drift us along without a care in the world.

Running adjacent to that small island was a short, barely submerged sand bar which connected the island to the shore. Our kids soon discovered it, and once they realized what it looked like to others as you walked along the sand just below the surface, they began striding, majestically like they were a miracle from heaven, walking on the water, and I couldn't help but think of your expectations of the new rector here at All Saints'.



Then, a little while later, as their stately strides gave way to sprints, one of them lost their balance, and plunged head-first into the water, looking far from messianic, and I imagined those expectations of parish ministry again and thought to myself: 'that's a little more realistic'.

As I pondered all of that, with a wry kind of smile, I looked around at the scene before me - the sun speckled tree line, the deep tranquility of the lake, the love of my family - and I was struck by the sheer beauty of it all.

It is my imagination that Peter, James, and John were also struck by beauty. They would come to know what it was like to live a life that rises and falls, as they would go on from that mountain-top experience with Jesus, to the way of the cross and the mystical journey of what it meant to follow a risen Lord - known but unseen - as his apostles, sent out to the world Jesus came to reconcile to God. They would know what it was like almost to touch the heavens, and they would know what it was like to dwell in the darkness, as their own lives would be given over in service of their Savior. Yet they would experience all of that, with the beauty of Christ



transfigured, fixed in their hearts, like a mystery that cannot be captured with words alone. For true beauty is a mystery that is beyond our grasp; it can only be held with open hands, like faithful stewards of a heavenly wonder.

You and I, my dear Saints of God, are also among those who are called to be stewards of the mystery of God's beauty. Peter's letter says that we are to be, with him, 'eyewitnesses' of God's majesty. It was for Peter, as it clearly was for Moses before him, no small thing to faithfully pass on through word and action the best description a heart and a life can articulate what that majesty, what that beauty, what a world transfigured by God, looks like. Moses was so radiant, so resplendent with the beauty of God that it scared the heebie-jeebies out of the people of Israel just to look at the man. I have to say that I get that a lot of that myself. Yet, Moses was utterly clear in his mind, and in this instance quite insistent that the people should come to him and hear *all* that the Lord God had shared with him on his mountain top experience. Peter's insistence was no less thorough, admonishing the recipients of his letter that they should in the end 'be able at any time to recall these things'.



Why? Why did it matter that our ancient forebears should receive and retain the full download of God's word to his people via Moses? And why does it really matter that from generation to generation we pass on, among many other things, the spectacular tale of Jesus, Moses, and Elijah appearing in dazzling white on top of the mountain? It matters because in that word being shared, and in that story being passed down, there is also something numinous, a radiance utterly beyond our comprehension, a treasure we are called to be curators of, that somehow points us to a deeper truth: that we too are vessels of the glory of God.

This week, with only three days into my tenure here as rector, I already learned that Pat Kiley will be my saving grace. Yet I have to say, that I have met few people in my life who can pay me a compliment and then bring me right down to earth again, all in the same sentence. She's worked with rectors a long time, so I am guessing she has that particular trick down to a T. When I let her know old I am - 43, in case you are curious - she said, right away, 'Oh, people have been saying you might be younger than that', to which I swiftly replied, 'You can keep going down, at least to the late 20's'. Pat



simply retorted, 'Yeah, they're not going to go that low, I'm just saying.' After she left the room, I closed the door and wept, quietly for a while.

The nugget of truth for all of us in this is that my version of me and the world's version of me - whoever we are - don't always align, and the hardest thing you and I can find to believe about ourselves is that we are bearers of beauty. So let me be very clear: you and I have a calling, born in our identity as God's eternal beloved, as vessels of the glory of God, as living containers of the beauty of the maker of heaven and earth. It was St. Ignatius who said that the glory of God is a human being fully alive. You had better believe it. Not only for your sake, but for the sake of the calling to follow Christ down from the mountain and out into the world, as we struggle and strain to find expression for others of what that beauty really looks and feels and lives like.

I should share, given that this is my first Sunday and all, that by and large your vestry were fairly kind to me during the interview process. After ten hours in the same room together, everyone starts laughing in the end, just not always for the



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same reasons. However, there was one particular point in our conversation when I think it is fair to say that I freaked a few of them out. We got talking about evangelism, and I could tell immediately that the word alone broke some of them out into a cold sweat. We went on to what it might look like to invite someone to church, and I realized at this point that I might just as well have asked them how they might feel joining me for a session of speaking in tongues at the entrance to the MARTA station across the street. I guess that this particular part of our conversation can't have ended too badly because here I am, but some of the uneasiness points to something the Episcopal Church at large has been trying to work its way out of, namely, that lives are changed in places like All Saints, people are transfigured in them, from the inside out. Churches are communities of transformation, and our world is in great need of transformation, from top to bottom, so we simply have to find a way to invite others to discover that transformational power of God in their lives for themselves. Or put another way, my experience as a priest with all sorts of conditions of people, is that whatever the world of marketing, and consumer culture, and politics, and the great, long rat race, has to say to us as human beings,



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none of it gets even close to the core message of the Church: that people are of infinite and intrinsic beauty and value because they are of God. People need to hear that about themselves. You need to hear that about yourself. I need to hear it about myself. God loves you, all the time, every day, no matter what; you are God's eternally beloved, the life through whom God is choosing to transfigure this world from its current state to God's kingdom of justice and hope and iridescent beauty.

I intend to go out, on your behalf, and invite the city of Atlanta to this church community until the pips squeak; and be assured, I am taking you with me. You are beautiful - a vessel of God's glory. My prayer is that you may know what it is to live into that glory and come alive as a transfigured people of God.

Amen.