

GLORY, GLORY, HALLELUJAH!<sup>1</sup>  
Luke 9: 28-43  
A sermon by Thomas R. McKibbens  
February 14, 2010

We have a convergence of holidays this weekend. This is Valentine's Day; it is Presidents Day weekend; and in the liturgical calendar it is the last Sunday before the beginning of Lent, and the scripture for this Sunday is always the Transfiguration story. What a convergence of holidays!

Happy Valentine's Day! At one time our city was the epicenter of the commercial Valentine business. And in our church was George C. Whitney, the owner of the Whitney Valentine Company, which produced more commercial valentines than any company in the world. Now Worcester is no longer the center of the greeting card business, but the industry today estimates that one billion valentines are sent worldwide.

I

What does that have to do with the story of the Transfiguration?  
Nothing! But if a sermon needs to begin where people are and move toward the meaning of a text, then I am beginning where most people are today:

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Valentines! And now I want to steer us slowly but surely toward this text, the story of the Transfiguration.

I wonder if those disciples snored? The text says that Peter, James, and John were *weighed down with sleep*.<sup>2</sup> Who fails to know what that feels like? Sometimes the weight on your eyelids is more than you can resist. You have to close your eyes, even if you are sitting in a classroom or a board meeting or a church service! People are capable of sleeping in just about any situation when they are *weighed down with sleep*.

What is not clear in this passage is whether or not the disciples actually went to sleep. The Greek word in the middle of verse 32 can mean either “wake up” or “stay awake.” The translators of our pew Bibles chose “stayed awake,” implying that they never actually drifted off to sleep. But other translations say that they actually went sound asleep and waked up to see his glory.

The meaning is clear, however. When they were fully awake they saw something in Jesus that they had never really seen before. It was like a veil had been lifted and they saw him as he really was. And it took their breath away!

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<sup>2</sup> Luke 9: 32.

Could it be true that we live in a culture that is not fully awake in religious terms? The name of Jesus rolls off our lips as a kind of rabbit's foot dangling from our sentence structure. Listen to the frequency the name of Jesus is used in the language we hear. On the street corner, in shops and schools and offices—everywhere—we hear the exclamation, “Jesus Christ!” This culture, presumed to be so secular, throws around religious language like infield pepper after a double play.

But occasionally we wake up—fully awake—and see the brightness he brings to a darkened world. The most rational and serious thinkers have often stood in awe before Jesus. Even William Ellery Channing, one of the great interpreters of American Unitarianism, stood in reverent awe of Jesus. While rejecting the doctrine of the Trinity, he still said in his most famous sermon in 1819: “Jesus Christ is the only master of Christians, and whatever he taught...we regard as of divine authority, and profess to make the rule of our lives.”<sup>3</sup> And as for modern day atheists, there is even a website called “Atheists for Jesus!”

It is easy to understand why our hymnbooks are filled with hymns of praise to Jesus. Some hymns are very old. “O Sacred Head, Now Wounded”

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<sup>3</sup>Conrad Edick Wright, *Three Prophets of Religious Liberalism* (Skinner House Books, 1986), p. 48.

was written by Bernard of Clairvaux in the 12<sup>th</sup> century! We still sing it during Lent. The “Gloria Patri,” which we sing every Sunday, dates back perhaps to the 3<sup>rd</sup> century! Today, songs of praise to Jesus range from Bach to gospel rock.

The earliest hymn I ever remember learning is not in our book, but lives on in my heart. It may not be the best poetry, but it brings joy to my life to this day:

There’s within my heart a melody;  
 Jesus whispers sweet and low,  
 “Fear not, I am with thee; peace, be still,”  
 In all of life’s ebb and flow.

Then comes the chorus:

Jesus, Jesus, Jesus, sweetest name I know;  
 Fills my every longing, keeps me singing as I go.

Friends, there is something significant in the Transfiguration story when it says that they *saw his glory* when they were fully awake! That sight, that realization, though only momentary, enabled them to face the valley below.

## II

There’s always the valley, isn’t there? *On the next day, when they had come down from the mountain*, the story says. And we all know what that

implies. He faced a case of epilepsy that made his disciples feel helpless. We come down from the mountain to face what is pessimistically called “the real world.”

That world back on the mountaintop where we see the glory of Jesus...that moment of awe and worship where we experience what we can only call “glory,” that transient glimpse of a world not made with hands—many consider that an unreal world. The real world, we are led to believe, is down in the valley where there is epilepsy and cancer, a recession and the rat race, earthquakes and homelessness.

Trying to catch a glimpse of the glory of Christ on the mountaintop of worship is considered by some to be a weakness. Some sneer at the faith of thousands of Haitians singing songs of praise to Jesus in the shadow of their cathedral reduced to rubble. The valley, they say, is the only reality. There is no mountaintop, we are told, where we can find strength and courage to walk calmly through the valley.

But what if they are wrong? What if those whose only reality is slogging through the valley are wrong? What if that mountaintop experience of the glory of Christ is also real? What if that divine vision of reality is the one great source of strength and assurance that enables us to walk through the valley,

even “the valley of the shadow of death,” with head erect and hearts pounding with love?

Our gathering here is a testimony to the reality of the mountaintop. From the heights of that reality we can see sights that we cannot see down in the valley to which we all return. But they are sights we remember when in the valley our way becomes difficult and the path before us is unclear.

Our gathering here is a way to bet our lives that the vision on the mountaintop is as real as the valley of difficulties and injustice is real. We cannot live our lives solely on the mountaintop in ecstasy, but neither can we live our lives solely in the valley without the vision.

### III

Few people illustrated that so profoundly as Martin Luther King, Jr., who on more than one occasion ended his sermon with these words: “I am certain of the future because...’Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord...’.” And he would quote the entire hymn, concluding with the words of the chorus: “Glory, glory, hallelujah; his truth is marching on.”

Take a moment to rub the heaviness from your spiritual eyes; look at the view from the mountaintop; and discover new strength for the valley!

Glory, glory, hallelujah!