

Transfiguration B, February 11, 2018, Emmanuel Lutheran Church, Lancaster, Pa., Kurt S. Strause

Julia Ward Howe was the daughter of one of America's most famous preachers, Henry Ward Beecher. Beecher was noted for his rousing sermons, inviting personal conversion, warning against drunkenness, and calling for the abolition of slavery. His daughter was no less fervent in her evangelical convictions. She preached through her poetry. Often her poetry was set to music. Her most famous piece of poetry was put together with an existing American tune, which we know as the "Battle Hymn of the Republic." The hymn became instantly popular in the American Civil War among the soldiers of the north, becoming, in effect, their marching tune as they marched into battle. You all remember the first line of the hymn, "Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord." We've all sung that hymn before. But that's the line I want you to remember, about seeing the glory of the Lord. We must also remember that the American Civil War produced more casualties, more dead and injured, than any other war our nation has been engaged in.

In the 1960's, a Southern Baptist preacher spoke to an audience gathered in front of the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, D.C. Martin Luther King galvanized a nation by proclaiming , that he had "been to the mountain-top, and I have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord." King's vision of God's glory included a day when all men and women will be judged not by the color of their skin, but by the content of their character. This vision still stands as one of the great aspirations for our nation not yet fully achieved. Just four years later Martin Luther King would lie dead on the balcony of the Loraine motel in Memphis, Tennessee from an assassin's bullet.

The story of another young man illustrates further what it means to "see the glory of the Lord." This young man lived during very troubled times. He recently came to believe in a crucified criminal who his followers claimed was risen from the dead. Young Stephen had never met Jesus, he came to faith through the proclamation of his followers. Stephen had a gift for proclaiming, for telling others of the crucified and risen Jesus, the ones his followers now addressed as "Lord." The religious authorities couldn't tolerate this claim and this preaching and so Stephen was sentenced to death. Death for heretics like Stephen came by stoning. As the hurled rocks pummeled the life out of his body witnesses heard Stephen cry out "Behold, I see the heavens opened, and the Son of man standing at the right hand of God." Stephen, the first Christian martyr, also saw the glory of the coming of the Lord.

The Transfiguration of Jesus which we celebrate today is about seeing the glory of the Lord. On that mountain Peter, James and John glimpsed who this Jesus really was. For a brief moment the entire radiance and glory of the fullness of God shone in and through the human Jesus. The disciples were so dazzled by all this, all they could do was mumble something about building some booths for Jesus and the other two figures seen with him, Moses and Elijah. And then, in the only other time we hear a voice from heaven speak, the Father declares his favor upon the Son, "This is my Son, the Beloved, listen to him!" The other time we hear such a voice is at Jesus' Baptism, when the Father declares, "This is my beloved Son, in him I am well pleased." After all of the excitement of seeing Jesus as he really is, he warns his disciples not to tell anyone until the Son of Man has risen from the dead.

These two occasions when the Father speaks from heaven concerning his Son Jesus bracket our celebrations of the Epiphany season. When we celebrate the Baptism of Jesus we always connect it to his death and resurrection. Baptism is a drowning, a dying to sin, with Christ, and being raised to a new life. In his Baptism the Father begins to reveal the Son to the world.

But it is a revealing always connected with and seen through the cross. Here, on the mount of Transfiguration, the first stage of Jesus' ministry is brought to a close. From the point forward Jesus sets his face to Jerusalem; to the events of his passion, trial, crucifixion, death and resurrection. That's why we read this passage today, the last Sunday before the season of Lent begins, with its focus on Jesus' journey to the cross.

The glory of the Lord is always joined with the cross. That's what is going here in the gospel reading today. Peter, James and John would like to capture a little bit of that glory and keep it for themselves. When Jesus tells them not say anything until he had risen from the dead, he's saying that the glory of God can only be seen and understood through the events of his crucifixion and resurrection. God's glory is a hidden glory. Hidden from the eyes of the world except through faith in the one who suffered and died and rose from the dead.

The cross of Christ, then, is no mere accident. It's not an inconvenient detour along the path to Jesus' glory. The cross is the only means by which the Father will reveal his glory through his Son.

In Baptism we are called to a cross-shaped life in the world. By baptism we are joined to the cross of Christ. And any glory we may see is always through this lens. There is in each of us a part of us dying, everyday. I'm not just talking about the physical body as it makes its way towards its earthly demise, although that certainly is related. In each of us the old self resides, the self oriented away from God, the self of which we confess being "captive to sin," unable to free itself. Baptism into the cross of Christ tells us that this self is dying, and in its place the new person is being born, the person conformed to the image and glory of Christ. We are not yet what we shall be, but we know what we are to become.

In the musical Man of La Mancha the hero Don Quixote tenaciously refuses to allow what is take over what shall yet be. He tilts at windmills, believes his broken down horse to be a magnificent steed. Aldonza the prostitute is to Don Quixote "My Lady Dulcinea." Don Quixote is able to see, as a fool is often able to see, Aldonza's true destiny. She is not yet what she shall be, yet Don Quixote keeps naming her the lovely, pure Dulcinea. Near the end of the play Don Quixote is dead and his comrade Sancho Panza speaks to Aldonza. She replies to him in a quiet but powerful serenity, "My name is Dulcinea."

Through the cross and in Baptism Jesus names us a new creation, new persons. In dying we shall yet be raised. Aldonza becomes Dulcinea. We are always becoming what we shall be. The glory of God which our eyes see is always fixed to the cross of Christ. And in that cross we find our meaning and our destiny. We all die in Christ, and we are all made alive. Like Peter, James and John we shall behold a vision of the resurrected and glorified Jesus. But Christ in glory still bears the marks of the nails in his hands and the wound in his side. The vision of glory which we shall all see does not erase the effects of Christ's suffering. Rather, in that cross we are transformed and set free. Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord, in arms stretched out from a cross in love for the whole world. Amen.