

Proper 24, Year A
The Feast of St. Luke
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For St. Mark's, Milwaukee
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Not infrequently, I read a passage of Scripture and find myself scratching my head. Thinking, what DOES that mean, anyway... Sometimes I know the usual interpretation but wonder what more there is to glean from the story. Other times I have no idea. What is the point? Surely it meant something to the Jewish people at the time it was written... But what, I wonder.

Preparing for this morning, I read the passage from Isaiah, where Moses and the Lord are having a chat. A challenging chat. In it, Moses is telling the LORD that he, and his people, are going to be faithful followers, sticking by the Lord, making it clear that THEY are faithful, that THEY alone will be God's people. I think it was our first version of "DIBS!" The LORD is our God, and nobody else gets to be God's people.

But the passage goes on – God makes it clear who is in charge. "I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious." "I will show mercy on whom I will shows mercy." God has chosen the Hebrew people. However, while bestowing upon them grace and mercy, God chooses to withhold the showing forth of God's glory...

Now, here's the head-scratcher for me: "You cannot see my face, for no one shall see my face and live. See, there is a place before me where you shall stand on the rock. And while my glory passes by, I will put you in a cleft in the rock, and I will cover you with my hand until I have passed by, and then I will take away my hand and you shall see my back, but you shall not see my face."

My husband was with me, and so I said to him, "What does that mean? Why is God putting Moses in a cleft in the rock, and covering him with his hand, and scooting by while hiding his face?"

Bill looked at me, and checked around himself, and said, "I was hoping you'd know that!"

The conventional, and likely a correct interpretation, is that God's glory was – and is – overwhelming to human beings. Seeing God's face is to take in a vision of perfection, of wholeness, that we, broken as we are, cannot comprehend, cannot even imagine let alone imitate.

Think of our gospel reading from Matthew this morning. Whose image is pressed upon the denarius which a Pharisee pulls out of his pocket? The Emperor's. "Not mine," says Jesus. "Don't give that to me!"

When Jesus tells them to give unto God, that which is God's, we have to ask ourselves, "What is God's, if the Denarius isn't his." If the face of the Emperor is not God's face, then what is? Where do we go to find God's image?

Here is where we find Moses and the disciples linked together, seeking the image of God. Looking for God's face, God's image in our world.

WE are where we must look to find God's image. In the mirror. Seated next to us. In the supermarket, on the sidewalk, in the hospital, outside our car windows as we rush by, faces half-covered with masks – still we bear the image of God, indelibly stamped upon our being. WE are made in the image of God.

In baptism we make this claim out loud, and it would do us well to remember it, "You are sealed by the Holy Spirit in baptism and marked as Christ's own, forever." As much, no more, than the denarius is marked with the image of the Emperor, we are marked with God, the Holy Spirit, sealing us for Christ, belonging to God.

So let us bounce back to Moses, shaded by God's hand. Perhaps he could not bear the truth. Perhaps it was so far from his reality that he could not comprehend that startling Glory. Thinking of God as so external to himself, maybe it was not time for Moses to see God's glory in his people.

But we are commanded to see God in ourselves and those around us. Every single one of them. Especially in those we can't imagine, don't like, can't stand. Maybe the person is black, or white, or in between, an immigrant, or a Republican, or a Democrat, or poorly or over-educated, or fat, or annoying, or simply a person with whom we disagree on any one of a number of subjects. The list goes on and on... people are just so... annoying... so wrong... so lacking. Yet every single one bears God's glorious image and if we are unable, or refuse, to see it, how much of a loss is that to us? And how cruel it is for them.

God's glory shows forth in all of creation. From the mosquito to the giant sequoia, to the massive sands of the Sahara, to the shrinking polar ice cap and to everything in between. All of creation shows us God's glory, groans in anticipation.

As Paul's letter to the Romans tells us in chapter 8:

Romans

...we know that the whole creation around us has been groaning with labor pains.

Eugene Peterson's paraphrase, *The Message*, says:

All around us we observe a pregnant creation
The difficult times of pain throughout the world are simply birth pangs.
But it's not only around us; it's within us.
The Spirit of God is arousing us within.

We're also feeling the birth pangs.

We are hidden in a crevasse, from which we see only glimpses of God's glory, choose only some to honor, believe God's people to be the few, the chosen, and honestly have a really hard time imagining our destination – our heaven – to be a place for all.

Perhaps this is especially true for us as we slog through this threatening pandemic, this time of great political upheaval. Our instincts pull us inward. We want to make our world safer, our lives safer. And, ironically, that selfish isolation is the best possible way to beat the pandemic into submission.

And so, we must call ourselves to double down. To make our daily prayers, morning and evening, an act of sacrifice (which, in case you hadn't heard, comes from the Latin words meaning to "Make Holy") We recommit ourselves to watch for God's glory, to look for the image of God in those, and in the world, around us.

Perhaps you begin by thinking about the one person who really and truly bugs you. Turn your heart toward him or her. Make it your practice to love them.

Does this seem simplistic? A sermon's charge too routine? Well, not one of us is too sophisticated to be reminded to humble ourselves and to love, to look for God, God's image, and finally to give thanks when we repent – when we turn around and are brought back to the simplicity of the Gospel.

As our liturgy for Reconciliation of a Penitent – more commonly known as "confession" – ends, and I ask of you as I, too, struggle to find the image of God in those around us, these words suffice: "Abide in peace, and pray for me, a sinner."

Amen.