

Mark D. Reichert

Transfiguration – 2 Corinthians 3:7-18 – God Gives Gospel Glory

2/10-14/21 – Good Shepherd Lutheran Church, Beaver Dam, WI

“*Rabbi, it is good for us to be here!*” Peter said. And who could disagree with him? Peter, James, and John got to spend some special inner-circle alone time just with Jesus that day, and little did they know, part of the deal was that Jesus was going to be *transfigured*, was going to change appearances from lowly to glorious right before their very eyes. And not only that, but they got to see and hear and meet the Old Testament prophets Moses and Elijah – men who were legends in their own right, whom these disciples had no doubt been learning about since their childhood.

I mean, who could blame them for wanting to put up some shelters and stay awhile? “*Rabbi, it is good for us to be here!*” It sure seemed like it. But was it really? I wonder what Moses would have said. See, he knew something about reflecting the glory of God for the people around him – you’ve heard that story already today. But the difference between what he did in his day and what Jesus did on this day couldn’t have been further apart. The disciples didn’t realize it right then, but as they stood there in wonder on the mount of Transfiguration, that was really a watershed moment between the mountains of Sinai and Calvary, between what the Bible calls the Old Covenant and the New Covenant. And what the disciples needed to learn is what the Apostle Paul teaches us in our Epistle lesson for today: true glory can never come from the works of the Law. No, God gives Gospel glory that lasts only through faith in Jesus Christ.

So now I’ll be the first to admit that all this talk in the Bible about Old and New Covenants is some pretty heavy stuff. Well, the first thing you need to know is that a *covenant* was an official agreement or contract between two parties that defined their relationship with each other. So when we talk about the Old Covenant, we’re talking about the Law that God gave through Moses on Mt. Sinai. God gave the Law to Israel, and if the Israelites obeyed it, they would be blessed. Those were the terms. That covenant ended when Jesus died on the cross.

But now where this really starts to get confusing is with the *New Covenant*. This Covenant is called “new” because you might say it was *officially ratified* when Jesus died on the cross, but actually it’s even older than the Old Covenant. In fact, it came into effect with God’s very first Gospel promise all the way back in the Garden of Eden and it remains in effect to this day: “*Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved*” (Acts 16:31). See, the real difference between the “Old” and “New” Covenants isn’t a matter of time or one replacing the other. It’s that the Old Covenant was something that served a temporary purpose and passed away. It didn’t last. But the idea with the New Covenant is that it’s better, it’s superior to the old. It’s meant to bring new life to God’s people that lasts forever in the new heavens

and earth that God is preparing for us – and in fact, that’s exactly what Jesus promises us every time we come to his Supper and he says, “*Take and drink, this is my blood of the New Covenant, which is poured out for you for the forgiveness of sins.*” Now again, that may all be very confusing and hard to process in this setting, so maybe it’s easier and more helpful if you just think of those two covenants in terms of the Bible’s two main teachings: the Old Covenant is all about the Law; the New Covenant is all about the Gospel.

So then maybe that also helps explain the glory that came with each covenant (or *ministry*, as Paul says here). Our lesson from 2 Corinthians says, “*Now if the ministry that brought death [The Old Covenant], which was engraved in letters on stone, came with glory, so that the Israelites could not look steadily at the face of Moses because of its glory, fading though it was, will not the ministry of the Spirit [The New Covenant] be even more glorious?*”

You remember the story. When Moses led the Israelites to Mt. Sinai after their Exodus from Egypt, he went up the mountain into the presence of God to receive the Law on stone tablets. Well after Moses spent all that time in God’s presence, he started to reflect that bright radiance of God’s glory in his own face, too. He didn’t realize it at first, but when he spoke to God’s people, the glory shining from his face testified to the fact that this wasn’t just any message he had. This was the very Word and Command of the true, living God that he was bringing to them!

There was grace and glory there – I mean, what an honor and privilege for those people! But inevitably, the glory of the Old Covenant got lost in transition. The problem wasn’t with God, of course – the problem was with sinful people who could never live up to his holy standard. When people started thinking about God’s Law like a challenge where they could earn life by keeping it, then that Old Covenant lost its luster and brought instead only fear and death and condemnation to everyone that broke it. What was first meant to be a very good thing became a very, very bad thing that the Israelites were so afraid of that they ran, because rather than vindicating them, being in the presence of God’s glory only exposed and accused them. The glory of that Old Covenant was fading and transitory, because it could never truly achieve perfection for God’s people. What was supposed to bring life in the end only brought death.

But that’s not even the worst of it. The worst of it is that sinful people by nature refuse to acknowledge that and turn from that. Paul says here that the veil Moses used to shield the Israelites from God’s glory isn’t half as bad as the veil sinful people have over their own hard hearts, because that veil is like wool over their eyes that keeps them from seeing God’s grace and truth. It keeps them from believing and keeps them from repenting; it makes them want to double down on that Old Law Covenant and so it really only drives them further and further into the quicksand that is sin and death and eternal condemnation.

But you, people of God – you have been freed from the curse of the Old Covenant through the Gospel of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. So don't let it suck you in again like the Israelites did, because the truth is, every one of us still has that sinful part of us, that nagging tendency that wants to put that veil right back on, to hide from God, and to make our lives and eternities all about us again. But no, we need to understand that that way leads only to death. That's why it's so important here at the outset of Lent that we take this journey together to Calvary. It's not an easy journey – it's a journey where we come face-to-face with our sin and inadequacy, the same as the Israelites coming face-to-face with the glory of God's Law. But remember that the solution isn't to hide your sin or ignore it or stop talking about it, like the Israelites wanted to. It isn't to give something up for Lent, if you think that's how you can impress God with your piety. No, the only proper solution to deal with our sin and inadequacy is to bring it to God and repent of it, because then he forgives us and renews us. The solution isn't to keep trying and failing to obey the Old Law Covenant; it's to find comfort in the New Gospel Covenant, because only there does God give real glory that lasts through the good news of what Jesus Christ did for us and for our salvation.

You know, the Transfiguration story said that the disciples really had no idea what was going on up there on that mountain. Even after Jesus told them that the Son of Man would rise from the dead, they didn't really know what that meant. They just didn't understand, because that veil was still mostly over their hearts and minds right then, too. But thankfully Jesus knew exactly what *he* had to do. No, the Old Covenant could never save them, so he couldn't just stay there and leave them to die. Jesus knew he had to press on toward his suffering and death and resurrection for us. He needed to *fulfill* the Old Covenant and *ratify* the New Covenant, and the only place he could do that was Calvary – because *that's* how God would bring us lasting righteousness and freedom and glory.

See, as drawn as we sinful human beings are to the Old Covenant, there's really no comparison between them. Comparing the Old Covenant to the New Covenant is like comparing the stars to the sun. A mortal man like Moses could only ever bring mortality to his people. But the God-man, Jesus Christ, the one who lived and died and rose again to save us – he brought life and immortality to light for us. The glory he won for us never fades; it can't, in fact, because it's not based on us and our failings. It's based entirely on God, his perfection, his promise and work that *never* fails, never goes bad, and never ends. As the prophet Jeremiah once put it, this New Covenant means the Lord is our God and we are his people, because he forgives our wickedness and remembers our sins no more.

The Gospel glory God gives us is the glory of true righteousness and holiness that achieves everything the Old Covenant couldn't: it doesn't bring death, it brings life! It doesn't bring condemnation, it brings salvation! And it's not about us getting ourselves right with God. It's about God making us right with him by faith in Jesus Christ.

So that means we don't need a veil between us and God anymore. As Paul said, "*Therefore, since we have such a hope, we are very bold.*" The message of this New Covenant isn't one we need to hide; it's one we need to share! We aren't separated from God anymore because of our sins; we aren't slaves to the devil anymore; we have nothing to be guilty about or ashamed of anymore. We're God's own children now, Christ is our own brother now, heaven is our own home now, and so the curse of death and condemnation can't touch us anymore. And since we're a part of God's own family now, that means we have the glory of keeping God's Law in our lives not as a burden that we have to do *or else*, but as a joy that we freely get to do in love and thanks and service; and it means we get to look forward to the glory of coming home to heaven one day, seeing God in all his glory as he really is, and putting off our old sinful bodies to be transformed into new, so-much-greater, glorious bodies, just like Jesus.

But people of God, remember that the glory of the New Covenant is glory just like at Jesus' Transfiguration. Until eternity, it's glory that's visible only by faith. So as we begin our journey together into Lent, let's remember again to keep that faith focused on Christ. Just as Jesus showed his disciples his Transfiguration glory to give them something to cling to even when everything else seemed to be falling apart, so also that's why God gives us the promises of the New Covenant. No, we could never be good enough on our own – but Jesus was good enough for us. Yes, we deserve death for our sins – but Jesus died on Calvary's cross in our place. No, Jesus didn't deserve to go through what he did – but he did it because that's how much he loves us and because he promised he would. And when life is hard now, the New Covenant means that God is always with us in faith and in his Means of Grace, bringing us closer to himself, working for our good, and pointing us toward eternal glory in heaven. It means that for Jesus' sake, God will never leave us or forsake us until he finally delivers us to our heavenly home. No, this world may not be able to see brightness in our faces in the same way they saw it from Moses. But they can still see that surpassing glory in the Gospel message that we speak and in the heavenly hope that we share.

"*Rabbi, it is good for us to be here.*" But was it really? Well yes, of course it was – but maybe not for the reason they thought. Amazing as he thought it was to be there with Moses and Elijah and Jesus, what Peter really needed to know that day was that Jesus still had a job to do, and he was not about to fail because Peter's eternal life and salvation – and all of ours, too – depended on it. Yes, it was good for them to be there so that they could come to understand that much more fully that the Old Law Covenant was passing away, and they were to be ministers of the New Gospel Covenant that lasts. The Transfiguration was a foretaste of that eternal Gospel glory that God gives to his people through faith in Jesus Christ – not one that fades, but one that shines on in our hearts and lives until we see it with our own eyes in heaven. Amen.