

Glory
Mark 9:2-9
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The first time I saw the movie “Glory,” I was so overwhelmed that at the end of it I couldn’t get out of my seat. I just sat there. I wasn’t alone. There was a lady behind me. She just kept saying, “wow.” Slowly. Maybe four times. It was dark in the theater still. They hadn’t turned the lights up because the credits were playing on the screen. This haunting music was reverberating through the speakers. And people weren’t moving. They were just sitting there. Not the way they do today at the end of movies when they are expecting some bonus movie footage. There was nothing coming after the credits. There was nothing left but the scrolling of endless names that were too small and rolling by too fast to read. And that music. And the darkened figures of those people who just kept sitting and staring at the screen. And the hush of that woman’s “wow” whispering behind me.

This movie. About enslaved men who had *no* future except the future allowed them by the men and women who “owned” them. Cancelled them. Cancelled their hopes. Cancelled their dreams. Cancelled their history. Cancelled their birthrights. Cancelled their names. Cancelled their families. Cancelled their freedom. Cancelled many of their very lives. The 54th Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry, the United States’ first all-African American regiment. The images were striking. The training of the black soldiers who had to fight for uniforms and equal pay. The whipping of a black soldier who had run off the camp to find decent shoes. The despair of the regiment when at first all they were allowed to do was manual labor. The disciplined fury of the men when they saw their first action. The heroism and professionalism of the soldiers as they waged this uniquely American war. The suicidal final charge against Fort Wagner, on the beach near Charleston, South Carolina, where 281 of the 600 soldiers in the 54th lost their lives. The movie ends with this defeat and the deafening quiet that followed it. The way the Gospel of Mark ends with a crucifixion and the emptiness of a vacant tomb.

Movies—and Gospels—are supposed to end with the good guys winning. But . . . wow . . . this desperate defeat. Like that vicious crucifixion. Where was the Glory in it?

The Glory was in the desperation . . . to overcome. The Glory was in the resistance, the struggle to prove oneself worthy of being free and equal and being able to fight for that freedom and equality with dignity and honor. The Glory of standing resolute before men and women who seek to cancel your very identity and place in this world and demand that they look you in the eye, acknowledge your worth, say your name, and respect your life.

Those men, those once enslaved African American men, they faced what they faced with determination and faith in God, faith in themselves. They weren't just fighting for *them*. They were fighting for everyone like them. They were fighting for *me*. More than a century before I would be born, and, already, they were fighting, and dying, for me. Fighting for African American voting rights. Fighting against income disparity, disparity in access to education, the matter of African American lives not mattering as much as the lives of others in moments of crisis and conflict. That is Glory. And I thought, still sitting in that darkened movie theater: “wow.”

I suspect that word, wow!, and the feeling behind it rather nicely sums up what Peter and James and John were feeling up on that mountaintop with a transfigured Jesus, a man who had just finished telling them that he was about to lose everything, so they, and we, could win. I suspect that this is why Jesus took them up there. To transfigure their vision away from the cross of death to the glory of resurrection. So they would stop fretting over the difficulties and dangers dogging Jesus' ministry and focus on the Glory of that ministry instead.

There are two other times in Mark's Gospel when it's just Peter and James and John with Jesus. At 5:37, when he goes to see Jairus's daughter. The little 12 year old girl who life has been abruptly and tragically cancelled. These three are the only ones in his discipleship corps that he allows to go to Jairus' home to be with him when he greets her family and friends. Her corpse is lying in her bedroom. When Jesus tells the people to stop mourning, they laugh at him. So, Jesus puts everyone out except the little girl's parents and Peter and James and John. Then

Jesus goes to her. What he does in the deafening silence of that lifeless room is miraculous. He resurrects her. In front of her mom and dad. And Peter and James and John. Jesus wanted them to see. The Glory of . . . Resurrection. The dawn of this little girl's *new* life in the midst of a community of people who had given up on her *old* life. Dead . . . to . . . Life. Wow, Jesus. Wow.

There is one other time. At 14:33. In Gethsemane. Before his arrest. When everything is falling apart. Death is looming. And, in a future cross moment, death will win. Before that happens, in this Gethsemane moment, Jesus wants Peter and James and John with him.

Why?

So they can see! Jesus is the key to new life. In him, what is dead, even a 12 year old girl, even his very own crucified existence, can and will live again. But right now, while Jesus walks and talks, lives and breathes, that promise of resurrecting life is a threat.

Whenever someone like those black men of the 54th Massachusetts fights to give new life to people whose old lives are crushed by state sanctioned and publicly permitted death, people in power use their power to enslave, hunt, lynch, profile, segregate, incarcerate, denigrate, and maim the lives of these life-giving people. Jesus was the ultimate life giving person. And, in Gethsemane, the people in power who had profiled him all across Palestine, were now hunting him on the outskirts of Jerusalem, with the expectation of segregating him and his seditious, troublemaking followers from the law abiding believers, and then incarcerating them behind the bars of tradition, denigrating them with the scandal of blasphemy, and murdering him under the banner of righteousness. Jesus wanted Peter and James and John to see this. See how he was betrayed to this destruction by one of his own. See how he prayed to stay connected to God even in the midst of that betrayal. How could Jesus still believe in God's love and protection in the midst of it all? How could they believe in the promise of Jesus' new life if the people in power in this life were able to wield such devastation and death against him?

Because of *THIS* time! This mountaintop time. Here, on the mountain, something very special happened. In the midst of this *current* troubled life, Peter, James, and John were given a

glimpse of the *coming* glorious life. The promise of resurrection blew open right in front of their eyes. While dwelling on the dirt of the present, they were elevated into the ether of eternity. So they could see past the trees, see above the clouds, see beyond the haters, see around the fears, see through the threats, even through the titanic threat of death itself . . . and believe in life. From this mountaintop vantage point, they ought to be able to see what *really* happened in that dead girl's bedroom. From this mountaintop vantage point, they ought to be able to see what will *really* happen in and after Gethsemane. *This* moment on *this* mountain is a glorious promise that no matter how bad it seems, it will turn out all right. Bad as a dead 12 year old little girl. Bad as a betrayed, soon to be crucified teacher. It will. Turn out. All right!

That seems a banal, inane, clichéd, simplistic theology for someone who has a Ph.D. in New Testament studies. You'd think I could come up with something better than that. It will turn out all right?! That's what someone says when he doesn't know what else to say. And I must admit, there are times I simply just don't know what else to say. I have seen good people get these god-awful diseases and, even after fighting valiantly with great faithfulness, wither away and die. I have seen good men and women stand for something they believe in, fighting passionately to make a better church, or a better school, or a better society for themselves, their children, and their community, only to be met with derision and ridicule and scorn. And in some countries, even our own, many of them end up losing their lives. Here in the middle of this black history month, I think of the many civil rights leaders like Martin Luther King, Jr. who lost their lives fighting for the lives of others. Like Medgar Evers, killed in Jackson, Mississippi, fighting for the freedom of his people. Like those four little black girls, bombed in that black Baptist Church whose congregation was demanding equality for all God's children in Birmingham, Alabama in 1963, just fighting to grow up and grow old: Addie Mae Collins, Cynthia Wesley, Carole Robertson, and Carol Denise McNair. Addie Mae, Cynthia, and Carole would be 72 today, Carol Denise would be 68. If they had lived. If everything had turned out all right.

But, you see, Jesus didn't just go up on that mountain to show something to Peter and James and John. He went up there for Arthur, who lost his battle with cancer. He went up there

for Martin Luther King, Jr., who lost his life to a bullet. He went up there for Medgar Evers, who lost his life to hate. He went up there for Addie Mae and Cynthia and Carole and Carol Denise, who lost their lives because the parents of little white children did not speak out loudly enough and stand up visibly enough for little black children. He went up there for any person, any people struggling to overcome a pandemic of virus, a pandemic of racial oppression, a pandemic of societal upheaval and political divisiveness. Jesus went up that mountain so that Peter and James and John would know that no matter how bleak this life gets, even unto the darkness of death, there will come a transfiguration of light. ***Life lived in God can and will light up!*** A little girl lying dead in a bedroom is not the end. Gethsemane and the crucifixion that comes after Gethsemane is not the end. Almost a half million people dead from a virus is not the end. Racial enslavement, racial segregation, and continuing racial injustice is not the end. Political divisiveness that leads to riotous insurrection is not the end.

The end is the Glory that Jesus unleashed up there on that mountain. The kind of Glory we are called to unleash down here in our valleys of our lives. ***Up there*** on the mountain stands Moses, who set God's enslaved people free. ***Down here*** in the valley huddle masses of people, still caught up in chains of racial and spiritual and gender and geographical oppression. ***Up there*** on the mountain moves Elijah, who faced down a prophetic horde of opposition to the God of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob and would not be moved. ***Down here*** in the valley tremble people overwhelmed by poverty, hunger, inadequate access to health care, and unequal educational opportunity. ***Up there*** on the mountain walks Jesus, who would touch lepers, who would eat with tax collectors and sinners, who would break the laws that prevented people from being right with each other and right with God, who would condemn the unrighteousness of those who proclaimed themselves to be religiously right. ***Down here*** in the valley people kneel for change and pray for transformation. ***Up there, up there***, the Glory of life rises like smoke from the fires of death we are so continuously and contemptuously igniting down here.

Up there, Jesus was transfigured with the otherworldly glory of God (8:38). Right before their eyes. And all of a sudden, everything in this rusty, beaten down old world just dazzles.

Peter is so flabbergasted, so discombobulated, so dazzled, that he completely mismanages the moment. Representing James and John, he says, “well, Rabbi, I can see why you brought us up here.” The next words out of Peter’s mouth confirm that he doesn’t have a clue why Jesus brought them up there! “Rabbi,” he says, “Let us build three tents. One for you. One for Moses. One for Elijah.”

Building tents takes time. Staying in tents, up on a mountaintop retreat, takes people *out of time*. Peter thinks the appropriate thing to do now is to build a little retreat center. And why not? Look at the glory all around him on that mountaintop. It’s not just the light show, it’s the people the light shows up. Moses! Elijah! Jesus! It’s their own little discipleship Mount Rushmore. Live. Up close. And personal. Build tents for them. Caucus with them. Have a Bible Study with them. Worship with them. Do everything in your power to stay with them. These people represent the greatness of their faith. Hold onto that greatness. Tabernacle with that greatness. Escape with that greatness. Don’t look forward, Jesus. Forward is Gethsemane, Golgotha, a vacant tomb, and an empty, broken discipleship corps. Look to the past, to the glory days we remember with Moses and Elijah. Here there is life. In the midst of all the difficulties swirling down there in the valley, difficulties that will drown us if we wade back into their stiff and unpredictable currents, there is nothing but the specter of failure and desperation and death. Let us make it so you can stay up on the mountain in retreat, Jesus! Stay with Moses. Stay with Elijah. And let us tent up with the three of you.

Jesus doesn’t answer. God answers for him. God answers the from the heavens. God tells them, Who do you think this is? Peter, James, John, this is my son. MY SON! He represents me. Who I am. How I think. What I want. For my people. Listen to him. For God’s sake, Peter, James, and John, for my holy sake, stop listening to the little, fearful voice inside your head. Stop listening to the counsel of people who keep telling you to keep a low profile, don’t stir up trouble. Stop listening to the voices that tell you to revel and recline in past greatness. Use the memory of your glorious past as the energy to fuel a determined fight for the glory of God in your present and future. How do you do that? Not by hiding in tents up here on

the mountain. But by listening to him. Listening to MY SON. Listen to his words. Listen to his life. And the first thing you'll hear is that you need to get down off this mountain.

Parents often overlook the faults of their children. God, I think was overlooking a lot of the problems surrounding the kind of person God's son had become. Up here on the mountain they can keep him out of trouble. Keep him tethered to the memories of Moses and Elijah. Stop him from trying to make horrible, troublesome memories of his own. Up here on the mountain, he shines like the sun. *Down there* in the valley, he filthies himself by cavorting with filthy people. *Down there*, he's touching lepers. *Down there* he's partying with criminals and sex workers. *Down there* he's breaking sacred laws. *Down there* he is reviling the people who are religiously righteous. And the worst thing. This man who dazzles up here is constantly soiling his reputation and his person down there by going over into Gentile territories and preaching and acting like Gentiles, *Gentiles* are also part of God's coming Rule. Gentiles, for God's sake, God! How can a man who relates to the wrong race of people dazzle for God? And how can we dazzle for God if we follow him? No, he's too inclusive of the wrong kinds of people, he's too dismissive of the orderliness imposed by the law, he's too determined to bring about a vision of the future in the present that is in direct opposition to the kind of present the people in power have produced. And if he goes back down there, we won't be able to stop him.

So, God, let us build him a sanctuary of tents up here where he can dazzle and people can look up and see the dazzle on the mountain top and be amazed. Everybody can stay clean that way. We could stay with him. Maybe you could even get us some of those dazzling outfits. Stay up here with the past, stay up here with your son, and stay out of trouble.

They weren't intending tents for Jesus. They were intending sanctified, secluded sanctuaries for themselves. I wonder sometimes if that isn't what we've done with our churches. We say they are for Jesus. But we really build them for us. Sanctuaries that too often become just that. Sanctuaries. Sanctuaries that save us from too closely following Jesus. Sanctuaries where we can spend a lot of time meditating on the past, people like Moses and Elijah and Peter and James and John, but not enough time following a Risen Christ who is on the revolutionary

move engaging an inclusive, rule breaking, wrong people embracing ministry that gets people, gets his own people in trouble. What Peter was thinking? Stay up on the mountain, stay out of the valley. What Christians are too often thinking: stay in church, stay out of trouble.

Here, on the mountain God, speaks out of a cloud. In Exodus 24:16, God spoke to Moses, out of a cloud. Mark says this Transfiguration story happens after 6 days. When Moses was up on Mount Sinai, the glory of the Lord covered him and the mountain for 6 days. Jesus takes three companions. Moses took three companions. Jesus' countenance is transformed. Moses' countenance was transformed. Peter and James and John are afraid. When the people saw the glory on Moses face, they were afraid (Exod 34:30). This Jesus story is a recasting of that Exodus story. And what was the Exodus story about. It was about the struggle to liberate God's people from oppression. It was about the revolutionary idea that God would not allow God's people to struggle forever, that God would send someone to intervene. That in the midst of dying and death, God would foment life. Revolutionary, emancipatory, dazzling life. God sent Moses. God sent Jesus. Just as Jesus intends one day to send Peter. And James. And John. And Us. Down from the mountain top. Into the valley of the shadow of death with the blinding light of life.

But before you go, you need to know something. If you do this, if you pack up your tents, and wander out of your sanctuaries, to go representing Jesus' liberating power in this oppressing world . . . there will be trouble. God says so. Remember the leper touching, and the sin forgiving, and the tax collector and sinner interacting, and the unethical law breaking, and the Gentile including. That's trouble right there. That trouble will bring him betrayal. That trouble will bring him suffering. That trouble will bring him a cross. But none of that, betrayal, suffering, cross, can diminish the glorious light of life that shall endure. The light up on that mountain is a promise. The darkness will rage. But it will not win. The end is Glory. And it is all the more glorious because of the struggle.

Climb the mountain. There is Glory up there. Climb down from the mountain. There are desperate people in terrible need down here. But there can be glory down here, too. If we listen

to God's Son. If we follow God's son. Out of the sanctuaries and into the valleys. To transfigure. Like Jesus. Jesus' greatest transformation wasn't what happened up there on that divine mountain. His greatest transformation was what he did down here in our very human valleys. By speaking like Jesus, by living like Jesus, we can be caught up and transfigured by God so that we too might transfigure God's world.

Wouldn't that be . . . glorious?