

The Appearance of the Likeness of Glory

LaGrave Christian Reformed Church

January 12, 2019-PM Service

Rev. Peter Jonker

Ezekial 1

Have you ever noticed how hard it is to explain deep spiritual feelings and experiences to another person? All of us who are Christians have moments in our life that are spiritually significant. Maybe not conversions exactly, but spiritually significant where God is very present, very close. Have you ever noticed how hard it is to explain these moments to others—to put your experience into words? I think this is a universal phenomenon. I think that's the reason many Christian people have a hard time talking about their faith. I remember as a youth hearing ministers and youth leaders challenging us to talk about our faith with friends, calling us to be open about our faith. 'Don't keep the good news to yourself!' And that's right of course. Faith is meant to be shared. But part of why we hold back is that it's really hard to find words that express what's going on in your soul and why it matters. It is hard to find words that accurately convey what is going on in our heads and in our hearts.

In my own life I think of how hard it is for me—a professional talker—to properly explain and express my spiritually significant moments. When I was a teenager, I was hanging out with some friends in an apartment. Some of my friends had gone to the Young Calvinist Convention and they were sharing their experiences. They talked about how they felt so close to God. They talked a little about their small groups and how they prayed for each other. I can't remember any specifics beyond that. But I do remember through our conversation feeling a deep sense of God's presence and goodness. I felt the Holy Spirit there and I felt peace. What exactly did my friends say? I can't remember. How did that conversation end up working so powerfully in me? I can't explain it. Frankly, it's not much of a testimony. Someone asks me what's one of the times you knew God was at work in your life, and the best I can come up with is an ordinary conversation with some friends. It's not exactly gripping. But for me it was and is terribly significant. Here's the truth: our deep experiences of God are only partially explainable. An unbelieving friend asks you why you are into Jesus and you hesitate, you stumble over your words and you find yourself reaching for clichés.

In his famous vision, Ezekiel suffers from the same problems of explanation. Ezekiel is a priest among the Exiles in Babylon. He's sitting by a Babylonian canal one day when he has this fantastic mind blowing vision. God himself comes to Ezekiel and makes himself known to the prophet. And Ezekiel wants to share this vision with us. Only when Ezekiel tries to explain exactly what he has seen, exactly how God revealed himself in the vision, he has real trouble making it clear. As evidence of struggle consider this: as I read the passage earlier, were you able to make a picture in your mind of what Ezekiel saw? Congratulations to you if you were. I had to read the passage 3 or 4 times before anything approaching a clear picture appeared in my head. It starts with a windstorm and an immense cloud like glowing metal. Around the cloud there is flashing lightning and fire. Out of the fire come four living creatures. And as far as I can tell these creatures are in a square formation. Each of these creatures has a head with 4 faces on it—human, ox, lion and eagle. Each creature also has four wings—two are lifted up and touching the wings of the creatures next to them. The other two wings are covering their body. Under each wing there are hands. Fire and lightning move back and forth between these creatures. Beside each of them is a wheel—actually two intersecting wheels turned at right angles. They were

sparkling and around their rims were full of eyes. Above the creatures spreads a canopy which is like clear ice. On that canopy there is a sapphire blue throne. On the throne there is a figure that is described as looking like a man. Although the man is part rainbow, part fire, part glowing metal.

This is Ezekiel's strange wonderful vision of God. Or rather, it is Ezekiel's attempt to describe to us what he saw. Look carefully at the way Ezekiel explains his vision, look carefully at the words he uses, and you see that this isn't exactly what he saw, it's only a close approximation. His language in this chapter shows us that he is struggling to find the right words for his vision. That's why the most common word in this chapter is the word 'like.' Did you notice that? I saw what looked like 4 living creatures. They looked like glowing metal. The wheels appeared to be made like wheels intersecting wheels. "Above the vault over their heads was what looked like a throne of lapis lazuli, on the throne was a figure like that of a man. From what appeared to be his waist up, he looked like glowing metal, as if full of fire, and that from there down he looked like fire..." There are no less than ten qualifiers in verses 26-28. Ten times Ezekiel admits that what he saw wasn't exactly this, but something like this. Words are inadequate to describe what he has seen.

And then there is the ultimate qualifier at the end of verse 28. What is it that Ezekiel has just spent 27 verses describing? Is it God? Is that description of the being who looked like fire and metal and rainbow mixed together, was that God? No. "This was the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the Lord. And when I saw it, I fell facedown." This glorious spectacular vision with the fire and the lightning and the wheels wasn't God, it wasn't the appearance of God, it wasn't the appearance of the likeness of God, it was the appearance of the likeness of the glory of God. There are four degrees of separation from God in its full reality and even that is enough for Ezekiel to fall on his face in awe. Verse 28 has to be one of the most awesome and humbling verses in the Bible. We cannot capture our God in words. We try. We try to describe God. We try to explain Him. We try to capture Him in words. And I suppose that's inevitable. Words are all we have after all. People ask us about our God and words are the best tool we have to explain who He is and why we worship Him. And so we write theologies and catechisms, we write sermons and devotional books, we write academic papers and poems, we write hymns and songs and anthems and we paint pictures and build buildings all trying to capture our faith, all trying to explain it, to understand it, to make it plain to each other and the world. We must do this and indeed we are called to do it. But I'm quite sure that even our very best attempts are simply a glimpse of the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the Lord.

Calvin Library has close to a million books and journals all being used by Calvin University to discern the mysteries of God and His world. Of those million, probably 200,000 of them are specifically theological in character. Thank heaven for all those books. Thank heaven for all those people who have struggled to describe God. These authors have given us a wonderful gift. Their words are the best things going when it comes to figuring out the mystery. But maybe all these words together, all of this wisdom combined, is just a glimpse at the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the Lord. At the end of the gospel of John, after John has spent 21 chapters trying to show you who Jesus is, 21 chapters of words that try to capture Jesus, John writes this, "Jesus did many other things as well. If every one of them were written down, I suppose the whole world would not have room for the books that would be written." You can almost hear John saying, "I tried to show you the fullness of Jesus but I'm not sure I've done it." John senses that you can't finally fully capture this Jesus in words. All you have is the appearance of the likeness of the Glory of God.

Who is God? Do you think you know? Do you think you have a pretty good idea who He is? Have you memorized your catechism and now you think you've got the answers? Don't count on it. Barbara Brown Taylor tells a story of when she was a sophomore in college at a secular institution. At this point in her life Taylor was not a Christian. Her parents had been cynical about religion and its benefits. She was in her dorm room one afternoon when there was a knock at her door, and when she opened her door she found herself face to face with two prim girls in sensible shoes who had Bibles clutched to their chests. 'The Holy spirit has sent us, may we come in?' they say and before she could think of a suitable reply the girls have pushed through the door and have planted themselves on her bed. The first question they ask is predictable: "Are you saved?" "Well," says Taylor, "That all depends what you mean by saved." "So that's a no." they say and write something down on a sheet of paper. "Would you like to be saved?" the girls ask. Out of a detached curiosity and because she thinks it would be rude to simply say 'no', Taylor says "Sure." The two girls proceed to draw a picture of two stick figures separated by a large chasm. One of the pictures was labeled God, the other was meant to be her. "Right now you are separated from God, do you want to know how to get back?" "Sure" she said, still curious. The girls drew a bridge in the shape of a cross over the chasm connecting the two stick figures and labeled the cross "Jesus." "Now say this prayer with us" said the girls: "I accept Jesus Christ as my personal Lord and Savior and I ask Him to come into my life, amen." Partly out of amusement, partly serious, and partly because she just wanted to get these two girls out of her room, Taylor said the prayer. The girls got up, gave her a hug, gave her a bible study schedule, and left. The whole thing took less than 20 minutes.

Now based on what I think I know about evangelism and what I think I know about God, this is the worst sort of evangelism. I'm embarrassed by this kind of evangelism. there's no relationship, no real conversation, you simply pass through an assembly line: Here's God, here's you, here's Jesus, pray this prayer, and we're done. If I have figured out anything about evangelism as a minister over the years, I say that this is not what God has in mind for how we are supposed to do it. And yet despite what I think I know, something happened to Barbara Brown Taylor that afternoon. She went out for a walk later and the world looked different, the ground felt spongy under her feet, people's faces looked different, and her own face burned for over an hour. "Was it a conversion?" she asks, "All I know is that something happened, something got my attention and has kept it through all these years that have passed since then. I may have been fooling around, but Jesus was not." You can't predict this God. You can't nail down this God. "I am who I am, I will be who I will be," He tells us. This is where the Pharisees went wrong. The Pharisees and the religious leaders of Jesus' day thought they had God figured out and nailed down. They had the system worked out to the last detail. Who God was, who God wasn't. They knew all the rules. They knew who the good guys and who the bad guys were. They had it all nailed down. And so when Jesus showed up, they checked their list and said, nope, you don't fit, and they dismissed him. And when He wouldn't stop talking they tried to nail him down. But He got loose, and He has been loose ever since, out in the world doing strange wonderful things in strange wonderful places. Breaking down walls. Changing expectations. Changing lives. Lifting up the humble. Since that day He has been doing more than we ask or imagine and far more than words can describe. I often wish that I had better words to explain God. I often wish that I could go to the bedside of a dying person and say exactly the right words to give that person the assurance of their salvation and make all the fear and doubt go away. I wish I had just the right words I could speak to a young person to make her feel close to God. I wish I had just the right words for a perplexed person who can't figure out what God is

doing in her life. But I don't have those words. I have things I can say. I have this book. The Lord does not leave us wordless. Even so, my words often feel to me a little better than the words of those two girls in Barbara Brown Taylor's room. And that turns us back to the place where our help comes from. I may not be able to capture God in my words, but in this season I remember that the word became flesh and has a hold of me. Our words fail, but God's word does not fail. I may not be able to capture Him in words, but through the word, through His death and resurrection and His blood, His grace has captured me. Hear the good news: The God who appeared to Ezekiel in fire and cloud lightening, has appeared to us in a manger. The Lord has come to us. We have seen His glory, the glory of the Father's son. And the Lord has set His sights on us and He won't rest until He sees the salvation of His world and His children. So go out into the world with all your hesitating words and know that He will use them to bring His kingdom.

© Rev. Peter Jonker