

When I arrived at church yesterday for the ALIVE! Last Saturday Food Distribution, I discovered a copy of today's scripture insert on my desk with every instance of "glory" or "glorify" circled and the question, "What is glory?" Turns out, our Thursday morning Bible study noticed something I hadn't; there is a lot of "glory talk" in our lessons today:



- Our Collect, or opening prayer, calls God "the King of Glory," whatever THAT is.
- Our lesson from the Acts suggests that, just as Jesus left Earth in glory, he will come back "in the same way," that is, in glory from heaven.
- In our second lesson we are told to rejoice when we "share in Christ's sufferings," so that we also may "be glad and shout for joy when his glory is revealed." This passage even says that when we are reviled for the Name of Christ, the "Spirit of Glory, which is the Spirit of God, is resting on us."

The King of Glory, the Spirit of Glory—lots of glory talk! So we shouldn't be surprised when, in our gospel lesson, Jesus looked up to heaven and said that "the hour of his glory had come," so that he might "glorify God."

What did Jesus mean?

There's an easy answer. I'll start there. But then you'll say, "I understand exactly what Jesus was saying." And that's when you will know for sure there's got to be more, because when have we ever known EXACTLY what Jesus meant without digging deep?

The easy answer is this: the Greek word in our gospel lesson that's translated "glorified" throughout means "to show honor."

- So here Jesus looked up to heaven and said, "Father, the time has come for you to show honor to me so that I might show honor to you." That's cheeky of Jesus, isn't

it? Somehow we get the impression that Jesus might be talking to us, rather than to God.

- And, “I showed honor to you on earth by finishing the work that you gave me to do. So now, Father, show honor to me the way you planned before you created this world I’m presently a part of.” I know people who have approached THEIR death in this way, using these words: Father, I’ve done the work you have given me to do during my life time, so take me home now, please!
- And, “Thank you for giving me disciples, because they have shown me honor by recognizing your grace and truth in me.”

And with that, Christ Jesus rose upward until he disappeared from his disciples’ sight. Before jet packs. Before teleporters. Before UFOs or alien abductions. All THEY had were divine messengers who moved around in mysterious ways, defying the laws of physics before those laws had even been discerned.

The thing is, most Western Christians today, when they are being very openly truthful, don’t believe that Jesus actually physically ascended into heaven. I believe this is literally true, but it has taken me decades to get to this point! But Jesus couldn’t just fade away, could he? After accomplishing all that he had come to accomplish, Christ Jesus:

- got to go back to his Father in heaven (to use the old language),
- got to put his glory back on (to use quaint language),
- got to claim success even though he had died a shameful death.

Instead, he not only rose from the dead, but hung around until all who knew and loved him were witnesses to his resurrection. Instead, Jesus not only ensured there were witnesses to the success of his earthly mission, he ensured they would pass on what they had seen and heard.

- Because a resurrected Christ who just faded away would be eventually forgettable.
- Because a resurrected Christ who told us where he was going and why, and promised to send his spirit to guide us to him, and invited us to join him, is a Christ with whom we could have an ongoing relationship.



In other words, without the ascension we would have lost the memory of Christ Jesus by now, would have lost the certainty that the God who created us has prepared a place for us to be one with him in life and to be physically with him after we die. That's why Jesus had to "lift off" in the presence of witnesses. That's why he had to tell those he left behind what was going on.

And that's the easy answer. Today is the Last Sunday in Easter, when we remember Jesus' physical departure from earth. We call today Ascension Sunday. We know from Stephen's vision while he was being stoned that, indeed, God did glorify – show honor – to Christ Jesus. Stephen saw

Jesus in heaven, sitting and then standing at the right hand of God.

I warned you, though, that there's a deeper answer. That's because the word "glory" in the other parts of today's lessons mean something different than "show honor."

When our Collect calls God "the King of Glory," for example, it doesn't mean that God is the best at showing honor (although, being God, he undoubtedly is). What we humans mean when we talk about God's glory we often mean his "spectacular otherness," such as his radiance. We mean "God in dazzling shininess" when we call God the "King of Glory."

Chances are, this is that Moses had in mind when he asked God to show him his glory. At the time, God wanted Moses to lead the Israelites from Mount Sinai into the wilderness, and Moses was reluctant. So Moses asked for a sign in Exodus 33:18 when he asked God, "Show me your glory."

God responded that he would make all his "goodness" pass before Moses. So to God, God's glory—his essence—is "goodness."

I don't think we are wrong, you understand. I think God's goodness looks so beautiful to us it shines radiantly, like the sun. To us, truth is beauty and beauty truth. This is hard-wired in us, make in the image of God.

Here's one more. In Isaiah 6:3 we hear about angels crying, "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God almighty." This is where the words of our Sanctus come from that we say or sing in every Eucharist service. The very next thing the angels say, though, is that "the whole world is full of his ..." Wouldn't you think they would say, "holiness?" But the angels don't say "holiness." Instead they say our whole world is full of God's "glory."

From this we know that the glory of God is the incredible radiant beauty of God's goodness, God's holiness. God's glory is the way we can see and understand and experience and even participate in God's goodness, God's holiness.

In this vein, when we perceive God's very essence, we see his glory, and in this way we glorify God.

So perhaps what our gospel lesson today is deeply saying is that THIS is the day when we are asked to perceive Jesus' very essence. Is his essence the very goodness, the very holiness of God the Father? If so, this is the day we must choose to glorify the Son. I suspect that if we asked Jesus about this he would say "no." Because the Son's essence points unfailingly and in every way to God. But isn't that the work that the Son was given to do while he lived among us?

For this reason, where Christ Jesus has gone, we want to go; we choose to go. Because, ultimately, "the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth."