

“Stardust People”

Exodus 24:12-18; II Peter 1:16-21; Matthew 17:1-9

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Mary Taylor Memorial United Methodist Church, Milford, Connecticut

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Stars. We’ve heard a lot about them this week with the Academy Awards being presented tonight in Hollywood, California. The Oscars, as they are also known, present the “best of the best” in the motion picture industry by the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences. 34 million people watched them on television last year, 1/3 the viewership of the Super Bowl that same year and the lowest viewership in eight years. Perhaps the hope is that Jimmy Kimmel, this year’s new host, will turn that around.

But while those are the stars in entertainment this week, I found today’s scriptures pointing us to different stars: the ones in the sky. Consider these thoughts:

“We are all made of stardust. It sounds like a line from a poem, but there is some solid science behind this statement, too: almost every element on earth was formed at the heart of a star.

“Next time you’re out gazing at stars twinkling in the night sky, spare a thought for the tumultuous reactions they play host to. It’s easy to forget that stars owe their light to the energy released by nuclear fusion reactions at their cores. These are the very same reactions which created chemical elements like carbon or iron - the building blocks that make up the world around us.”

This extended quote from physics.org (physics.org/article-questions.asp?id=52) continues with a detailed scientific explanation of how stars live, die and explode, *“scattering the stardust which now makes up planets including Earth.”*

The theophanies described in Exodus and Matthew employ the pillar of fire and God’s blinding-light presence to describe the visible manifestation of God to people. This is so

like the luminous stars and the fire of nuclear fusion from which their light comes. The Transfiguration glimpsed Divine glory revealed in Jesus. That glimpse, on the mountaintop and in our lives, makes us Stardust People: created in the image of God and through whom God's radiance shines.

We, too, have these momentary glimpses of God's glory. As a pastor, I often see them in weddings and baptisms. They are glimpses of the divine for clergy and, I think, for a lot of the people in the congregation. I take a baby in my arms, pick up some water and put it on her and say that this little child, who hasn't done a thing to earn anyone's love, respect, honor, school degrees, big cars or fine houses: this little kid is a child of God. "Yes, that's it!" I think. "The love of God comes to those who don't deserve it, yes!" Just for a moment the face of that child shines – and so do ours.

Or I'll stand in the middle of the chancel with a young couple before me. And once they didn't know each other at all, and suddenly something like a spark jumped between them. And then they made all those darned arrangements! But somehow they made it to the altar, and they turn to each other and take each other's hands before God and the people. And sometimes I sneak a peek at the people, and their faces are shining with reflected light. People weeping for joy, even when they know some of the things the joy may lead to aren't so joyful. Weeping for the joy and wonder of it all, that this gift of love has come down once again, like the cloud in the story of the Transfiguration and settled its luminous glory around those two.

But listen! These human encounters are but a faint reflection of the glory of God in Jesus' face. The same three disciples he would later take into the Garden of Gethsemane to be with him in his agony are there to glimpse God's radiant love. Jesus is revealed as God's anointed as he encounters the

greatest lawgiver – Moses – and the greatest prophet – Elijah. The same words from God in Matthew 3:17 at Jesus baptism are spoken: *“This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased”* but this time with the added admonition *“Listen to him.”* It is a beautiful, breathtaking moment. As we sang:

*“Christ, whose glory fills the skies, Christ, the true, the only light,
Sun of Righteousness arise, triumph o’er the shades of night;
Dayspring from on high, be near; Daystar, in my heart appear.”*

The problem comes with our understanding of glory. When WE reveal glory, we list our accomplishments. Glory is your name on the door, the right car, the right address, the Academy Award. Glory is being able to say *“Yep! Everything’s fine. Kids, grandkids, everybody’s in great shape.”* But there’s always a corner of your life and mine that isn’t glorious...and sometimes more than a corner. Sometimes it’s a whole landscape, it seems, littered with refuse: the ash-heap of a life that started with dreams but now is, almost like the Master, nailed to a cross.

So preachers often use this story to say, “Get back to work.” You’ve been inspired, encountered the divine, now go back to the labor of ministry and the labor of life. There’s some value in that. I’ve preached sermons like that myself.

But I’m also aware that the reason WE can come down from the mountain is that GOD comes down from the mountain. The biggest STAR comes down among us. God reveals Divine glory not by staying on a throne in heaven but by showing up here. When God reveals glory, it’s in the middle of our lives, the good and the bad. God says, in effect,

*“I reveal my glory by being with you, and not just when you’re at your best. I’m with you also at your worst,
and when you think I’m not, and when you think you’ve lost me,
and when you think I’ve forgotten you, and when you’re suffering, and
when you’ve CAUSED suffering.”*

*I will not let you go. For I am God, and YOU also are my beloved child,
with whom I am well pleased."*

Again, with Charles Wesley we sing,

*"Visit then this soul of mine; pierce the gloom of sin and grief;
fill me, Radiance divine, scatter all my unbelief;
more and more thyself display, shining to the perfect day."*

So what we see on the Mount of Transfiguration is what we see in the faces of infants and children, of couples shyly taking their vows, of athletic perfection and a painter's sure strokes. I think we see love that had the courage to climb Calvary's mountain and say *"I'm with you in your suffering."*

And we see US. What might happen if, just when you are fuming and ready to pick a fight with someone, you could see their face shining with the light of God's glory and know who they really are? What if we could see as God sees? Would children get abused? Would nations take up arms? Would politicians despise one another? Would leaders exploit and oppress their own people? Would we be so alienated from members of our own family? Would we be so able to hate?

What would life be like if what Jesus showed us about ourselves was something we could see EVERY DAY: how glorious we really are, and what our TRUE humanity is composed of: not our achievements and accomplishments, but the love of God which sustains us and radiates through our very pores? We might, we just might, see a glimpse of the Divine in us: that we are made of stardust, and that we shine.