

Last Epiphany Feb. 23, 2020
The Rev. Deborah Woolsey

From Glory to Glory
Church of the Good Shepherd, Athens, OH

It wasn't an ending I thought was needed, but it turned out I was wrong. A recent episode of the BBC television show *Doctor Who* called "Rosa" featured the story of Rosa Parks and her refusal to give up her seat on a bus during Jim Crow segregation in Alabama. It's a historical event most Americans are familiar with, but the episode was a pleasure to watch through the eyes of a British science fiction television program. In the episode, The Doctor and her companions traveled back in time and met Rosa Parks the day before her historic refusal to take another seat on a segregated bus. When they met her, they were impressed, thrilled, even "fan-girled" over the polite woman who was understandably confused by their reaction. They quickly discovered another time traveler was there trying to interfere with history so Rosa Parks wouldn't have to give up her seat in the hopes of changing history and creating an America without civil rights and progress toward racial equality. Of course, The Doctor and her companions did plenty of interfering of their own and the events played out on the bus as history records, and Rosa Parks became a hero in the Civil Rights movement by refusing to move when the injustice of segregation demanded her to.

But unlike most historical storytelling, where we leave feeling good about a hero who stood up to injustice by telling us how this person and event helped make the changes that make the world a better place, in this episode of *Doctor Who*, The Doctor told her companions about the rest of Rosa's life story. And it wasn't all good. She told her companions that while Rosa Park's was given recognition in the form of the medal of freedom, an asteroid was named after her, and statues were made of her, she and her husband both suffered a great deal after her history making refusal to change seats on a bus. They both lost their jobs, experienced harassment, had moments of discouragement and struggled in many other ways. But, despite the setbacks, the injustices, and the struggles, she persevered. And that, The Doctor said, is Rosa Park's real legacy, and is how change happens, how good prevails.

At first I thought it was unnecessary to add that information when I first watched the episode. I thought it too "teachy", it felt forced and fake. But after reflection, I decided my first reaction was wrong. Because it is all too easy to forget that what makes a person a hero isn't the attention they get for a single

action, it is what they endure. And we need the reminder that glory isn't empty honor or praise, it is what happens when God enters into the pain of humanity and redeems it.

That's what today's Gospel is about, although it might be difficult to see it at first. We are told about this event in Jesus' life every Sunday before Ash Wednesday when the Church Season of Lent starts. It's called the Transfiguration because Jesus is transfigured or changed before his disciples' eyes and is seen not only shining like a star, but hanging out with Old Testament heroes Moses, the giver of the law who led God's People out of slavery and helped them grow into what it means to be God's People who were ready to enter the Promised Land; and Elijah, one of the major prophets who heard God's voice in the stillness on top of a different mountain and proclaimed God's words to God's People, even when he wasn't well received.

As if it wasn't enough for Jesus to be seen flanked by the heroes of the Old Testament, a glowing cloud descended and a Voice, the same one we heard at Jesus' baptism back at the beginning of the Church season of Epiphany, proclaimed yet again that Jesus is God's Son, the Beloved, with whom God is well-pleased, who is to be listened to.

That's quite the event. It's no wonder it makes the disciples fall down and tremble in terror. Many scholars and commentators have been eager to explain all this to us. They tell us Moses and Elijah represent the Law and the Prophets Jesus mentioned in his sermon on the mountain and this is the author of Matthew's Gospel showing us Jesus is indeed the embodiment of the continuation of the law and prophets and will be their fulfillment on another hill outside Jerusalem where he will be flanked not by heroes, but by thieves and will not shine with light but will be covered by the filth of violent abuse and public shame.

It can be confusing that scholars want to take us so quickly away from an awesome event on a mountain to the foot of the cross where there is only suffering. Why can't they let us have a nice ending to an event or enjoy the moment?

The answer to that question might come in an earlier part of Matthew's Gospel when Jesus' disciple Peter verbally declared Jesus was the Messiah. Peter had figured it out and knew who Jesus really is. Jesus seemed pleased with this epiphany, and in response to Peter's declaration, Jesus began to teach his

disciples what being the Messiah was going to involve. And it wasn't any of the things we consider to be associated with success or heroic acts: things like wealth, celebrity status, power. None of that. Instead, Jesus explained being the Messiah meant entering deep into human suffering: into injustice, violence, anger, fear, suffering, and even death. But that wasn't all there is to being the Messiah, Jesus explained, after three days he would rise again.

Peter responded to this teaching of Jesus by rejecting it with the words, "God forbid it." Then Jesus told Peter he sounded just like Satan.

That is what brings us to today's part of Matthew's Gospel where Peter is one of the disciples who followed Jesus up a mountain, to see the awesome light of the transfiguration and to hear God once again declare Jesus is God's Beloved Son, the one to be listened to. Which brought Peter and the other disciples to their knees in what appears to be a fear so crippling they can't even say they are sorry for not understanding or wanting to hear what Jesus had been saying before they went up that mountain.

It's perhaps easy to understand Peter and the other disciple's reactions to all this. After figuring out who Jesus is, to realize they have been in the company of the Messiah, they must have been excited, overjoyed, and projected their expectations of the hero they believed the Messiah to be onto Jesus. When Jesus spoke of suffering and death and raising from the dead, these were not the things associated with heroes of faith in their minds.

Which is perhaps why Moses and Elijah were with Jesus on the mountain during his transfiguration. Maybe they were present to do more than just remind the disciples and us of the law and prophets. Maybe they were present to remind the disciples and us their lives weren't only moments of celebration; they had plenty of suffering and injustice in their lives too. God's people didn't get to the Promised Land after a short, leisurely stroll through a state park where they stopped and enjoyed a picnic, and Elijah wasn't given a comfortable house to live in where people gathered outside to eagerly hear what he had to say. Both had to endure injustice and struggles and even rejection in order to follow God's will. Both had moments of discouragement and yet they carried on, they persevered, always with God's help and presence.

And that may be what the author of Matthew's Gospel was hoping Jesus' disciples and we would remember when they described the transfiguration. That glory isn't in the shining of glitter, or the cheering of a crowd, it is something

much more powerful. Glory is when God enters into the suffering of humanity: when we are lost in the wilderness, when we are rejected for sharing God's love, when we stand up for the equality of all people, and when we suffer the consequences of contradicting a power structure that fears changes will diminish its power.

In the telling of the transfiguration, the author of Matthew's Gospel represents this glory quite simply, beautifully, and in a way so and small it is easily missed. It's easy to mistake the glory in the shining light and in presence of heroes and the cloud echoing with God's Voice. But the moment God entered into human suffering on that particular mountain top wasn't in all that. It was in the moment Jesus went over to his disciples, trembling and cowering in fear on the ground, and touched them. Only Matthew's Gospel has this tiny little detail of Jesus laying his hands on his terrified disciples. In so many other places in the Gospels we read that Jesus' touch is no minor thing; his touch has the ability to heal, to comfort, to restore life. And his touch in this event is no less important. It is, I believe, all the stuff of glory.

It is this glorious touch that perhaps helps the disciples hear Jesus words, "rise up and do not be afraid". The very thing they needed to hear to persevere in following him.

In these last days of the Season of Epiphany, a season when we reflect on the ways the light of God's love shines in our lives and how we can reflect that same light into the world, maybe we can be on the lookout for moments of glory in our lives, in our parish, and in our community. It might be in a scripture reading or the soaring music of a hymn during the worship service, or it could even be in a reminder in a television program or novel you are reading, or it might show up in a conversation over a cup of coffee or tea, or when someone reaches out to touch your hand in prayer or greeting. Any small moment we find what we need to persevere, to carry on, is a moment of glory shining with God's love.