

“Thunder or Angels?”

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Presbyterian Church in Leonia

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Jeremiah 31:31-34

John 12:20-33

If you ever join one of our church’s bible studies or Monday night vespers, more often than not, you will hear why a certain phrase of scripture or prayer resonates with someone. And then, more likely than not, you will hear from another person why they did not like that phrase of scripture or prayer at all. “That sounds too judgmental,” one might say, while the other will say, “Oh really? I found that verse to be more about the justice of God’s love.” All interpretations are welcome and engaged.

It is true, when Christians bring their minds and hearts together to share: some may hear thunder, while others may hear angels. Our gospel passage today tells us that a voice from heaven spoke of glory, and that some heard it as thunder, and that others heard it as the voice of an angel. Glory in scripture means a couple different things at least. In Greek, we see the word *doxo* which means praise-- when we are together in church, we sing the Doxology. In the Hebrew understanding of glory-- *kabod*-- glory is an ineffable presence, only rarely seen, but too powerful and exquisite to be described in mere words. I think of Moses, in Exodus 33, when he asked God on top of Mount Sinai to “Show me your glory!” Instead God replies, “You cannot see my face, for no one can see me and live.” God offers instead, “See, there is a place by me where you shall stand on the rock; and while my glory passes by I will put you in a cleft of the rock, and I will cover you with my hand until I have passed by; then I will take away my hand, and you shall see my back; but my face shall not be seen.” Even when Moses descends Mount Sinai after this interaction to share the covenant with God’s people, Exodus says his face shone so brightly that the people were afraid, and so Moses would put a veil over his face so that he could address the people without shining too brightly.

In John’s telling, we hear the word *glorify* or *glorified* appear 3 times in this short passage. We know that glory, from a biblical perspective, contains something powerful and holy-- and also dangerous. And to truly understand and follow Jesus means we have to engage the powerful, holy, and dangerous truth of his glory: that he would, like a grain of wheat, fall to the earth and die. But in dying, he will bear much fruit.

There are so many people who do not want to look at this kind of glory. Remember how many times Jesus tried to bring up his death, and how it would lead to life, only to hear his disciple Peter say, “Oh no, no, Lord, let’s not talk about these things!” Interestingly, it is when some Greeks-- that is to say, Gentiles, uncircumcised, outsiders to the covenant-- tell Andrew, “We want to see Jesus,” that Jesus begins to talk about glory.

Andrew and Philip, as disciples, had been with Jesus all along, yet they and the other disciples had a hard time seeing the truth of Jesus' glory. But when these outsiders, Greeks, ask to see Jesus, Philip and Andrew are able to see Jesus in a new way.

One of the things that used to delight me, before the pandemic has kept my family mostly home, was to go out with my wife to visit with friends. My introverted wife, once she warms up to a crowd, sometimes shares a story, or presents a side of herself when she's with friends she enjoys, and it is something I have not yet seen or heard. And I *love* that. It's like I get to see new layers to her when we leave the familiar patterns of our lives. Don't get me wrong: there's no one I'd rather snuggle up with for a night of Netflix on the sofa. But it increases interest and admiration when I see my partner in the context of our friends.

The more people Jesus met, the more interesting he became, and I think his connection to glory grew too-- in all its holy, powerful, and dangerous ways.

Here's the dangerous part: Jesus, when he made this speech, had just entered into Jerusalem at the time of preparation for the Passover. Just before, he had raised his good friend Lazarus from the dead. People were following. People were talking. Jews, Greeks-- it did not matter, for all kinds of people were sensing Jesus' glory. And when Jesus spoke about people serving him, those were words of real threat to the powers and the system of domination that was already in place. When in Rome, you serve the emperor. And beneath him, there was a whole hierarchy of people to serve. The religious authorities had their own ladder of who should be served, too, and who should do the serving.

Jesus said, "Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there will my servant be also. Whoever serves me, the Father will honor." But what the ruling elites may not have realized, is that when Jesus spoke of service, he did not mean being treated like a king. He did not even mean he would preside at the altar of the Temple. Service in Jesus' name looked-- well, different.

To understand how we might serve Jesus, we simply have to look at how Jesus served others. He fed them. He healed their wounded bodies. He touched them-- even the most untouchable. He washed their feet.

It occurs to me, as I have been reflecting this week in particular upon the violent massacre of 8 people in Atlanta, 6 of them Asian women, and the larger context of violent acts towards AAPI in the US this past year especially, that Asian Americans know something about service. Whether by a sense of calling, or a sense of doing what is needed to be done to provide for a family, Asian immigrants in particular often work jobs of service. Whether doctors and nurses or dry cleaners and nail technicians, many Asians and Asian Americans work in jobs that tend to the many needs of the body. Of course this is not the only thing that Asians do-- there are journalists, bankers, architects, sociologists, and so much more.

Asian Americans often get pigeonholed into the Model Minority myth-- that is to say, the false notion that all people of Asian background are smart, upwardly mobile, and keep their heads down and work hard. You might wonder why *wouldn't* someone want a stereotype like that? One reason this stereotype is harmful is that it keeps those on the outside from truly *seeing* their Asian friends, neighbors, classmates, colleagues, and church members for their individual yearnings, struggles, and giftedness-- which may not match up to the stereotype. Another reason this stereotype is harmful is that it renders invisible those who do not fit the myth: the outspoken and angry Asian teenager who has had enough and lets others know it; or the massage worker who spends nights at the spa to provide for her two kids, but when she is home takes her boys out to sushi and throws family dance parties on the apartment floor. Our society has pushed some groups of Asians so far into the margins, it is no wonder that it took nearly 5 days to even identify all the victims of the Atlanta killings.

The man who killed 8 people in Atlanta identified as a Christian. This is something we Christians need to talk about. Maybe the messages his faith taught him about sexuality were delivered with thunder, rather than with the tender care of angels. Maybe while thinking he was worshipping at the altar of Jesus Christ, he was really feeding his religion at the altar of white supremacy, at the altar of toxic masculinity. Maybe holding a gun to him felt more sacramental, more transformative, than the waters of his baptism. We don't really know, but we can say there was so much more going on than him having a bad day.

Do you remember what I said about glory being powerful, holy-- and dangerous? And how much acts of service to the body follow the model Jesus gave to us? I wonder if the killer, in his yearning for the touch of these massage therapists, realized he was at the service of his yearnings; and these women had more power, knew something more about glory, than he did or ever would. Maybe the altars where he worshipped taught him that he could be his own God. And yet-- he found himself, in these spas, feeling vulnerable, and *not* very godlike. Like the Romans who crucified Jesus, the thought of being in service to someone else threatened him. So he took what was in his earthly power, and tried to make himself like God, taking on the power of life and of death.

This is a story that evokes a great deal of emotion in our community. We all feel grief. Some may feel anger, rage even. Some may feel terror-- I have heard from people who are now fearful of even going to work. Some may feel emotionally exhausted and numb, maybe exposed as victims, or unsure whether to trust others with their pain, or just plain tired of doing the emotion-work of telling others how they feel or educating those who just don't get it.

And yet: I am amazed at the resilience, the renewal, and the resistance to hate I have seen coming from Asian Americans and those who are their allies. Like the grain of wheat that has fallen to the ground and died, I see already fruit emerging from their lives and stories. Their lives *never* should have been lost. But their lives were not in vain. Because of them, more Asian Americans are claiming their voices and they are taking up space, and they are *anything* but invisible. As a church, I hope we can be in solidarity. There are two upcoming events where we can start to do that. On Friday, March 26 at 7 pm, there will be a vigil at the Leonia

Sculpture Garden for AAPI victims and survivors of violence. I will be praying at that vigil, and I hope our church will show up to show solidarity and encouragement. Then, on Monday night, March 29 at 7:30 pm, we will have a Circle of Grace on Zoom; I was asked to host this by one of the Asian American members of our community; it will be a time of prayer and sharing for those who wish to share stories and experiences of what it is like as Asian Americans in this time of increasing hostility-- and for those who do not share that experience to be there to listen, learn, support and pray. If anyone finds what is said threatening, we will be in a safe space; keep listening, and the sound of thunder might turn into the sound of angels as we witness glory taking place.

The prophet Jeremiah spoke to a kingdom that was divided. Not only that, they were living in exile. They knew they had been worshipping at the altars of *false gods*-- even though long ago God had made a covenant with them; even though God had taken them by the hand and led them out of Egypt; even though God had been as a husband to them.

Clearly there had been a lot of teaching *about* God. "Know the Lord" they said. But though they were talking *about* God, they were missing the chance to actually relate *to* God. Still, God came to Israel again, this time to make a new covenant. It would not be external, but this time God would write it on their hearts; "I will be their God, and they shall be my people," God promised. And God would usher in a time of forgiveness and renewal. Their sins would be remembered no more.

What might it mean to write one another's stories on our hearts? I suspect it might redefine what *belonging* means. I suspect it might give us a new sense of being of service to one another. I suspect in this hard and vulnerable work, we may put to death some harmful notions, and find fuller, fruitful life as we discover glory in our midst.