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## Glimpses of Glory: Luke 9:28-36

R. Wayne Stacy

*Liberty University*, [wrstacy@liberty.edu](mailto:wrstacy@liberty.edu)

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## Glimpses of Glory: Luke 9:28-36

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**R. Wayne Stacy\***

### Introduction

Imagine that it's 11:40 A.M. Sunday morning, and you're working hard in the sermon to help your audience understand the difficult and often painful work involved in being forgiven. "Forgiveness is hard," you say, "because hovering over the broken relationship like a vulture are those deeds done you cannot undo, and those opportunities lost that can never be recaptured." You made the point clearly and concisely, but in the minds and hearts of the audience, it is still just a "point," not an experience. Then again, you could tell them a story:

Do you remember Mac Sledge, Robert Duvall's character in *Tender Mercies*? It's one of the most powerful stories of sin and judgment and grace and forgiveness I've ever seen. Mac had been a successful Country & Western singer and song writer out in west Texas until the bottle "laid him low," wrecked his life, ruined his career and ravaged his marriage.

In a moving scene, his eighteen-year-old daughter, whom he'd not seen since she was a little girl, came to see him one day. As she stood there in front of him, she seemed a parable of his sad, wasted life, the daughter he'd never really known. They awkwardly try to carry on a conversation, these two strangers, but the words won't come. And as she turns to leave, she looks at her old, weathered, wasted Daddy whom she never knew, and summoning up a sacred memory she takes one more stab at it:

"Daddy, do you remember that song you used to sing to me at night before I went to bed?"

"No, can't say that I do."

"You know, it went something like, 'On the wings of a snow, white dove; He sent His...something, something love. . . .' How'd that go?"

"I don't remember."

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\* R. Wayne Stacy is Professor of New Testament and Preaching and Dean of the M. Christopher White Divinity School at Gardner-Webb University in North Carolina.



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She leaves. But as she's driving off, there's old Mac, standing at the window watching his baby leave for the last time, and from somewhere he thought he'd buried forever he starts to sing: "On the wings of a snow, white dove; He sent his pure, sweet love; A sign from above, on the wings of a dove."

Now, both make the point, but which would you rather hear?

Moreover, notice: part of the power of the scene is the fact that both those who've seen the movie and those who haven't experience the poignancy, encounter the pain, embrace the pathos: the latter for the first time, the former all over again for the very first time.

The purpose of this article, therefore, is to discuss and to demonstrate how the cinema can be used as a resource in preaching. I begin with a brief description of my homiletic, firmly positioning my preaching style within the so-called "new homiletic." I will then proceed to a brief exegetical analysis of the biblical text of the sermon, followed by a brief description of the movie which serves as the "point of entry" for the sermon. Finally, I will present the sermon itself so as to demonstrate one preacher's "take" on the utility of the cinema in sermonizing.

## The Old Homiletic and the New Homiletic

There is in homiletics today an increasingly used convention for distinguishing between two very different approaches to the sermon. Many students of preaching have taken to dividing contemporary preaching into two camps, the so-called "old homiletic" and the so-called "new homiletic."<sup>1</sup> The serviceability of this homiletical convention is to be seen in the way it cuts across other, less substantive intramural differences which exist within the two homiletical families, so as to heighten and highlight the differences between them. For example, Eugene Lowry groups together under the category of the "new homiletic" six quite different preaching styles: inductive preaching, the story sermon, narrative preaching, the transconscious African American sermon, the phenomenological move sermon, and the conversational-episodal sermon.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, practitioners of the "new homiletic" include persons with preaching styles as diverse as Fred Craddock, Tom Long, Eugene Lowry, James Forbes, David Buttrick, and Barbara Brown Taylor.

What distinguishes the new homiletic from the old, chiefly, is its objective. The old homiletic understood the purpose of the sermon as disseminating information, propositions, facts, and making judgments. Under the influence of Aristotle's Rhetoric (the dependence upon which can be

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copiously documented in the texts of the old homiletic), the purpose of the sermon was to persuade rather than to inspire. It engaged head rather than heart. It was more intellectual than emotional. When the sermon was finished, it could be adjudicated successful if the congregation had gotten the information the

preacher had passed on to them in the sermon. Hence, the clearer the communication, the more successful the sermon. The objective was to *inform* the congregation, not so much to inspire them or to change them or move them or capture them. It focused on the cognitive domain, not the affective. Therefore, it is not at all surprising that this style of preaching took as its chief structural model the *essay*. In the old homiletic, a good sermon, like a good essay, should clearly state its thesis, analyze it thoroughly in terms of all its aspects, summarize its “findings,” and then recapitulate the thesis to make sure everyone “got it.” The one concession the old homiletic made to the affective domain was to append (and I do mean *append*) an “application” to the end of the essay/sermon, evidence of how uneasily the inspirational aspects of the old homiletic are conjoined to its informational objective. This is the kind of preaching in which people take notes. It is monological. It is ideological. The primary objective is the transference of information from the preacher to the listener.



Moreover, because this kind of preaching focused on the dissemination of information and employed the essay-form as its primary medium, the particular form of the text being preached was largely of no consequence to the form of the sermon. If you're interested only in communicating the truth of the text in the form of propositions mined from the text like jewels from ore, then one size fits all. “I have three things I want to say to you today about grace. They're easy to remember; they all begin with the letter ‘g.’”

In contrast, the new homiletic is about journey not judgment, pilgrimage not proposition. The emphasis is on *movement* – within the text, within the sermon, within the audience, even within the preacher. In the new homiletic, the listener is taken on a journey, with the text as guide, from where he/she is to a place the preacher shows him/her. More influenced by Aristotle's *Poetics* than his *Rhetoric*, the objective of the new homiletic is to create for the listener a new experience rather than merely to pass on information from the preacher to the listener. As in *Poetics*, the new homiletic aims for the heart rather than the head, the emotions rather than the intellect (though the intellect is often engaged too). In the new homiletic, the preacher's task is to pull back the curtain on a new world and allow the listener to glimpse it for a moment, predicated on the belief (more precisely, the hope; that's why I call this kind of preaching “eschatological speech”) that this new world, all appearances to the contrary, is, in fact, the *real* world. For this reason, in the new homiletic images are more important than ideas. Images evoke experiences; ideas disseminate information.

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Moreover, with this kind of preaching, one size most assuredly doesn't fit all. The preacher must be concerned not only with what the text is *saying*, but also with what it is *doing*; that is, both the literary genre of the text and the communicative strategies implicit within it.

For example, a letter is a very different form of communication than a story, and a sermon on a letter must take into account the communication strategies



unique to letters, as opposed to stories. Literary genres set up particular expectations within the listener. When I read/hear a story, I expect such things as plot, characters, setting, dialog, etc. Whatever “message,” if any, I am to get from the author of the story is communicated to me *indirectly*. But when I read a letter, I expect none of these things. Rather, I expect very direct communication between the writer and the reader. Hence, with the new homiletic, the form of the text should inform the form of the sermon.

My own sermon style is new homiletic, as will be clear in the sermon to follow. My sermons don’t have “points,” but they do make a point. Using Lowry’s six categories, I fit most comfortably (and consistently) into what he calls the “conversational-episodal” style. For me, the sermon is an extended conversation – with the text, with the audience, with myself, with characters in stories or in the text, and, chiefly, with God. For this reason, my preaching is primarily first and third person preaching; the audience is rarely addressed directly. The audience *overhears* the sermon’s conversations usually. The reason for this sermonic strategy is that it reduces the audience’s defenses. They relax, feeling unaddressed and, therefore, unthreatened, while the sermon creates for them experiences with which they identify, and a world into which they enter almost unwittingly. By the time they figure out that they *have*, in fact, been addressed all along in the sermon, it’s too late to marshal defenses. The claim of the text has “captured” them. It is for this reason that most of my sermons have a “gotcha” moment. There is a parabolic quality, I think, to good preaching.

Moreover, my sermon style is also unapologetically biblical. Unlike some narrative preaching, I try never to let my preaching stray very far from the text. My view of scripture is that the voice of God addresses us uniquely in the Bible, and my goal in sermon preparation is to enter into the text as fully as possible in the attempt to hear that “Voice” and to be captured by its claim. Then, having heard that “Voice,” the task of the preacher is to say to the audience, “Gather ‘round, let me tell you what I heard.” The goal of the preacher, then, is clear: *to score the same point with your audience that the text originally scored with its*. In my judgment, that is what makes preaching “biblical.” The text is not an inkblot that means whatever the preacher wants it to

mean, nor is it a springboard to launch the preacher into flights of fancy. It is the echo of a Voice that calls us and claims us and saves us.

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## The Cinema and the Sermon

It is a cliché now that today’s audience is more visual than auditory. It is becoming hackneyed to document the so-called “paradigm shift” from modernity to postmodernity. To be sure, the hegemony of objective rationalism that characterized modernity is giving way to the subjectivism, pluralism, and contextualism of postmodernity. To be sure, on any given Sunday many of us

will preach to an audience that has never known a world without color TV, and for whom the cliché “you sound like a broken record” has no meaning.

But that said, it is my judgment that people are substantially the same as they have always been, and that they have always been more likely to be captured by experience than information. I remind you, storytelling is not a new art form, and it wasn't invented by narrative preachers! Given a choice, most people prefer a well-told story to a well-written essay.

Indeed, the essential qualities of a good story are precisely the essential qualities of a good sermon. As Aristotle made clear in his *Poetics*, the pattern of good storytelling is predictable and tripartite: a problem is introduced, a quest ensues for that which can satisfy the problem, resolution. In the same way, the qualities of a good sermon are also predictable and tripartite: introduce a problem, shed the light of the gospel on it which then surfaces the true nature of the problem and satisfies it, and finally, speak the truth of the gospel “home to the heart.”

Movies, which all follow this pattern of good storytelling,<sup>3</sup> are predictably well-suited to sermonizing. As Ed Gray points out, there is a tried and true standard outline that movie makers know by heart: introduce hero/heroine, hero/heroine has a weakness, something unexpected happens to hero/heroine, sending hero/heroine on quest for something/someone that will satisfy the weakness, hero/heroine hits bottom, confrontation ensues, happy ending.<sup>4</sup> According to Gray, “every major movie produced these days tells its story in the same way, following a rigid structure that becomes obvious only when you change your focus and look past the surface complexity to take in the larger whole.”<sup>5</sup> Gray contends that this pattern, which has now become almost archetypal in most of us and which we inchoately recognize, can be traced back to Aristotle's tripartite structure for the three-act play discussed in his *Poetics*.<sup>6</sup> There does seem to be a grid through which we hear a story and to which we expect a well-told story to conform. Not surprisingly, the new homiletic, which insists that the sermon more resembles a story, or perhaps even better, a movie with scenes in which the plot moves inexorably towards the expected denouement, has almost from the beginning made use of this medium in its sermonizing. Add to that the fact that for the contemporary postmodern generation the cinema is *the* storytelling venue (far more than the novel or the play), and the movie becomes a “natural” for use in the “new homiletic” style of preaching.

Personally, I tend to use movies in my preaching in one of three ways. Occasionally, but not often, I will use a movie as a guiding metaphor or image for a sermon, intertwining the story of the movie and the story of the text into a seamless narrative, allowing each to interpret the other. I do this rarely, however, for two reasons: it is difficult to sustain this kind of intertwining throughout an entire sermon, and if one is not careful, the movie can force the biblical text onto



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a Procrustean Bed and violate its intent.

Often, I will use a scene from a movie as an illustration in a sermon. As I demonstrated in the story from *Tender Mercies* at the beginning of the article, scenes from movies, because they form a “collective memory” for the audience, function as brief, compact, self-contained experiences which can be recreated for the audience with just a few, well-chosen words.

The third way I typically use a movie in preaching is as a “point of entry” into the sermon. Remember, a good sermon, just as a good movie, surfaces a problem, raises an issue, reveals a conundrum that launches the quest for the Word that surfaces and satisfies the problem. Every good sermon must have a “point of entry” into the problem presented by the text. Ideally, it should be a point of entry with which everyone in the audience can identify. I call this “gathering the audience.” Scenes from popular movies are particularly well-suited for this because they have their own internal integrity. They can be told quickly, straightforwardly, and pointedly so that everyone is captured by the problem, identifies with the hero/heroine in the movie, and vicariously launches out both with them and with the preacher on the “quest.” The fact that this can be done in about three minutes at the beginning of the sermon is critical in that you can expect only about that much time in which to “gather” your audience before you lose them to daydreams, the bulletin, the hawk flying by outside the window, or the “sermon-nap.” In the sermon that follows, only the premise of the movie is necessary in order to provide a “point of entry” into the sermon.

### **Interpreting the Text’s Historical Context**

The Third Gospel is pastoral theology in the form of story. Though that statement seems simple and straightforward, it eludes many. To say that Luke is pastoral theology is to say that it is both pastoral and theological, as pastoral and as theological as the letters of Paul. The difference between Luke and the Pauline Letters is not to be seen in the intention of the compositions, but in their respective genres.

On the one hand, Paul’s audience is “front and center.” He writes to particular congregations whom we know are enmeshed in situations and circumstances about which we also know much; for example, the libertinism that inflicts the church at Corinth, and the legalism that stifles the churches of Galatia. Paul writes to these churches as a pastor who addresses their problems by bringing to bear theological insight that gives them perspective and altitude. That is, he sets the particular circumstances of their story within the larger framework and context of God’s story in the hope that this theological perspective will result in practical, moral, and spiritual “course corrections,” both personal and communal – pastoral theology.

On the other hand, because Luke writes a story rather than a letter, we often assume that he was writing history rather than pastoral theology. Hence, our

questions of the Third Gospel are often quite different from our questions of Paul's letters. When we read Luke's gospel, our focus is on the story being told rather than on the situation of those to whom he tells it. Hence, our questions are historical rather than pastoral or theological. But Luke's purpose is no less pastoral and theological than is Paul's. He simply uses a different literary vehicle to do his pastoral theology, namely, story.



To be sure, because Luke employs the literary vehicle of story rather than letter to communicate to his audience, his audience is much more difficult to conjure. Luke's audience is oblique and implicit and must be adduced from clues he provides in the way in which he tells the story, such as the story's structure, emphases, themes, point of view being expressed by the narrator as well as by characters

in the story, and the like. The task is somewhat formidable, but it would be far more so if we did not have three other gospels with which to compare it, two of which (Matthew and Mark) are particularly useful. But it can be done, and when it is done with care, a picture of the audience to which Luke addresses his story emerges.<sup>7</sup> Luke, no less than Paul, writes to a particular church struggling with particular circumstances and offers them pastoral theology in the hope that it will give altitude and perspective to their struggles. Only Luke, unlike Paul, does so not by saying, "Dear Friends at Galatia, I'm amazed at how quickly you've abandoned the gospel. . . ," but by saying to them, "Once upon a time, long ago and far away, God did something amazing among His people, Israel *and the Church*." They got the point.

While it is not possible in this article to provide all the supporting evidence for the picture of Luke's audience I'm suggesting, a quick read through of the Third Gospel will supply enough corroborating detail to confirm the portrait of the church that follows.

Luke writes a pastoral theology for his people, probably a house church in the period after it had become impossible for Christians to continue worshipping in the synagogue, who are struggling with two great difficulties – persecution and parousia. With respect to the former, Luke's church is struggling to make sense of their circumstances following the fall of Jerusalem in 70 CE. Christianity had been birthed and nurtured in the piety of Judaism, virtually indistinguishable from Judaism through most of its early history. If you had asked most early Christians, "Are you a Christian or a Jew?" they would not have understood the question. If you compelled a response, they would have said, "I'm a Jew, of course; I just happen to be a Jew who believes that Messiah has come and his name is Jesus." But 70 CE changed all that. Following the fall of Jerusalem, many former converts to Christianity abandoned the faith to return to their spiritual roots – Mithraism, the Imperial Cult, and of course, orthodox Judaism. With the latter, the pressures were particularly painful in that most early Christians had come into the faith from Judaism. However, the fall of





Jerusalem meant that a religion struggling with its own survival could no longer tolerate diversity in its ranks. Judaism hunkered down, and Christians were forced to choose. The charges leveled against the Christians by the synagogue were three: "What happened to you people; you started out so well? But now you've been unfaithful to your history and heritage in Judaism; you've been unfaithful to your own scriptures (the Old Testament); and you've been unfaithful to your own founder, Jesus, who worshiped in synagogue, read the scriptures faithfully, observed the sabbath and feast days with regularity, and gathered about him Jews to form the nucleus of a New Israel!" And so, for Luke's church, to remain within the faith meant suffering, persecution, ridicule, and alienation. Many opted out, returning to their Jewish or pagan religious roots. But for those who opted to stay, misunderstanding, pain, and persecution were their certain lot.

Moreover, their situation was exacerbated by the fact that the parousia, anticipated to be coincident with the fall of Jerusalem, didn't happen! And so here they were, like the disillusioned servants waiting for their master to return from the wedding feast, fatigued and frustrated by his delay, tempted to give up and go to sleep (cf. Luke 12:35-48), a parable, unique to Luke, of his church's situation. All Jesus had to do to alleviate their suffering was to return as He had promised; but he didn't. The parousia is delayed, and the persecution continues unabated.

And so Luke, writing his pastoral theology in story-form, gives them altitude and perspective on their situation by affirming, all appearances to the contrary, the oneness of God and the integrity of reality, both ontological and ethical. That is, he writes a theodicy, a reinterpretation of their situation with a view towards justifying the ways of God in human affairs. He tries, by means of his story, to render his church's experience, painful though it be, sensible by means of his prevailing convictions about God and his purposes.<sup>8</sup> In light of the situation and context of Luke's church (persecution, delay of

the parousia, fall of Jerusalem), Luke attempts to alter the expectations of his church by redefining their experience. Specifically, he redefines parousia to mean "presence" rather than just "coming."

Both etymological and historically the word can mean either (cf. *para* + *ousia* means "being along side"; hence, either "coming" or "presence"). But in the experience and hope of the church, it had come almost exclusively to mean the "coming" of Christ. So Luke reminds them that parousia can also mean "presence." In this regard, it is interesting that Luke *never* uses the term parousia itself. He avoids the term because it had come to mean exclusively the "coming" of Christ. Instead, he reminds them that the parousia of Christ means the *presence* of God with His people in the midst of suffering and persecution and misunderstanding, and that a *suffering* Messiah is scriptural too (cf. Isa 53 becomes Luke's template for telling his story of Jesus). And so, in between the "coming" of Christ (incarnation) and the "coming" of Christ (parousia), the church lives and is sustained by the

In light of the situation and context of Luke's church (persecution, delay of the parousia, fall of Jerusalem), Luke attempts to alter the expectations of his church by redefining their experience.

presence (parousia) of the Suffering Messiah, and by, as we shall see, occasional “glimpses of the glory” that is to be.



## Interpreting the Text's Literary Context

Though Luke's story has many scenes, it evinces in four distinct movements:

- Jesus' Preparation for Ministry (1:5-4:15),
- Jesus' Ministry in Galilee (4:16-9:50),
- Jesus' Journey to Jerusalem (9:51-19:27), and
- Jesus' Passion and Resurrection (19:28-24:53).

Our text occurs in the move dealing with Jesus' Galilean ministry (4:16-9:50). This move opens with Jesus' inaugural sermon in Nazareth (4:16-30) in which Luke adumbrates both Jesus' mission and His fate, and it ends with the ominous prolepsis, “And it came to pass in the time when the days of his ascension (lit. “receiving up”) were accomplished, he had set his face to go to Jerusalem” (9:51), hearkening back to the prophetic passage (Isa 50:7) in which the Servant “sets his face like a flint” confident in the knowledge that God would ultimately vindicate him. Luke tells the story of Jesus as a “prophetic rejection story” (cf. 13:33).

The specific literary context of our passage is to be found in the two questions (which Luke intentionally places back to back) to which the little scene of the Transfiguration supplies the answer. Both questions raise the issue of Jesus' identity. The first is put by Herod Antipas in the wake of rumors that Jesus was John redivivus: “John I beheaded; but who is this one about whom I hear such things?” (9:9). The second is put by Jesus himself in Luke's version of Simon's confession at Caesarea Philippi which Luke has deftly altered and relocated to its present position so as to serve as the question to which the Transfiguration provides the answer: “But who do you say that I am?” (9:20).

Luke modifies the Transfiguration story in three significant ways. First, unlike Mark's account, Luke sets the Transfiguration in the context of prayer (9:28-29), emphasizing Jesus' faithful and prayerful obedience to the identity and mission being revealed in the Transfiguration. Second, he heightens the mysterious, dream-like qualities of the story, (and their eyes were “heavy with sleep,” cf. Mark 9:2-8). Notice that Luke sets the event “about eight days after these sayings” (9:28), whereas Mark says “six days” (9:2). The eighth day was for early Christians a resurrection image (cf. many early churches and baptismal fonts were octagonal in shape). Luke was subtly reminding his audience of how this “prophetic rejection story” would end. Third, Luke links up the story with the Torah tradition of Moses receiving the tablets in a divine, mountain-top theophany (Exod 24:12-18). The parallels are striking: the mountain, the cloud symbolic of the *Shekinah* YHWH, the glory of the Lord's presence, Moses, and the



heavenly voice. Moreover, Luke heightens the connections between Jesus and Moses and the exodus tradition in two ways: (1) he actually uses the word “exodus” in 9:31 (mistranslated “departure” in the RSV), and (2) he refers to Jesus as “the Chosen” in 9:35.

The overall effect of Luke’s modifications is to present the Transfiguration as an epiphany, a divine breakthrough (theophany), an echo of Sinai, revealing the true identity of Jesus and reassuring Luke’s church of his continuing presence (parousia) with them in the midst of their own suffering and persecution. It is a “glimpse of the glory” that is to be on the far side of the vindication the resurrection (Jesus’ story) and the return (church’s story) will provide. It is meant to give them altitude and perspective on things, a “view from the balcony,” if you will, which will steel them for their own “journey to Jerusalem.”

## Interpreting the Text’s Theological Context

The theological context of our story is Luke’s eschatology. Just as he has redefined parousia to mean “presence” rather than just “coming,” so also he redefines eschatology to mean not merely “last things,” but a “breakthrough,” an epiphany, a window onto another world that gives perspective on our lives in this world. He reminds his audience, experiencing life very much in *this* world, of their citizenship and proleptic presence in “another world.” He reminds them that, like Jesus before them, though they are *in* this world, they are not really *of* this world, and that from time to time, that “other world” breaks through revealing itself, transforming the “dark night of the ‘not yet,’” as Charles Talbert puts it, into the bright, glowing day of the “already.”<sup>9</sup> And though they cannot remain on the mountain (Jesus won’t let Peter build booths), they can remember the “glimpse of the glory” they were privileged to witness and be sustained by it. This is the “point the text scores” and will, therefore, be the point (that is, the governing theological theme) of the sermon.

But for the preacher, this very point proves a formidable challenge in sermonizing. In preaching, the preacher is always attempting to “bridge the gap between then and now.” But how do you “bridge the gap” between this experience of Jesus and the disciples and our own more mundane experiences? What in our lives parallels the Transfiguration? How do you preach an epiphany

In preaching, the preacher is always attempting to “bridge the gap between then and now.” text? How do you make eschatology real? But we do have epiphany experiences, don’t we? From time to time we do “glimpse the glory,” do we not? In some ways, that is precisely what we do when we worship. As Will Willimon reminds us, leaving worship is a bit like walking out of a theater after one has seen a movie. For the space of two hours, we have “bought into” the story world of the movie. We suspend judgment and accept that there really is a “Hoth the Ice Planet,” and a “Darth Vader.” Then, when the movie is over and we leave the theater to reenter our own “world,” we find that we have to blink our eyes to adjust to this “new world,” the world we left

somehow seeming more “real” than the “real world” we have now entered. Worship, Willimon reminds us, at its best is an “epiphany experience” in which the worshiper, for the space of an hour, enters a wholly new world that is, in all the most important ways, more “real” than the world one left an hour before, so real in fact that one has to blink one’s eyes when one leaves the sanctuary.<sup>10</sup>



Indeed, this idea of walking through a portal or passageway into “another world” is a common metaphor in literature. Apparently, many of us believe that there really is “more than meets the eye.” It has also been a common theme in the cinema. One recent treatment of this theme was the movie *Stargate*. It will provide the sermon a “point of entry” into the text and its theme, “glimpses of glory.”

## Interpreting the Movie

*Stargate*<sup>11</sup> is a clever, classy, science fiction retelling of the Exodus story. The movie opens on a 1928 archaeological excavation on the Giza Plateau. Kathryn, the adolescent daughter of the archaeologist who is supervising the dig, witnesses her father’s discovery of a circular, portal-like structure protected by ancient cover stones with both ancient Egyptian hieroglyphs and strange symbols of unknown origin inscribed on it.

Decades later, Kathryn, now an old woman, visits a scholarly lecture being presented by an Egyptologist, Dr. Daniel Jackson, whose unorthodox views about the age and origin of the Giza pyramids have brought upon him both discredit and derision from the academic community. Sensing that perhaps this eccentric scholar has the ability to decipher the strange symbols on the portal, Kathryn invites him to a secluded military installation where the portal is now ensconced. The cover stone includes a large center stone with a cartouche containing seven strange symbols never before seen, surrounded by circular stones with inner and outer inscriptions. The inner ring of inscriptions are composed in ancient Egyptian hieroglyphs. Quickly, Daniel translates the hieroglyphs and discovers that the writing indicates the purpose of the portal behind the cover stone – it is a “stargate.” But the outer writing remains a mystery. For two weeks Daniel struggles to translate the strange symbols on the outer ring, but to no avail. Then, quite by accident, a breakthrough occurs. Daniel, working late one evening, happens to notice on a newspaper being read by one of the military guards a star chart with the constellation Orion on it. Instantly, he recognizes one of the strange hieroglyphs he’s been trying to decipher. Suddenly, he realizes that the strange symbols are not writing at all; they are constellations! The outer ring is not writing; it is a road map to another world.

Using the newly-discovered information, the team is able to lock in the coordinates indicated in the cartouche and the portal-like stargate opens. But to where? It is decided that a team will travel through the stargate to its destination, and that Daniel will accompany them to the “other side” so as to be



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able to help them navigate through the stargate on the other end and return home.

When the team gets to the other side, however, they find themselves in a strange, Giza-like world complete with a pyramid exactly like the Great Pyramid of Khufu in Egypt, and an indigenous population that speaks the language of the ancient Egyptian hieroglyphs as a living language. It is clear that the two Egypt-like worlds were once linked by the two stargates.

As the plot unfolds, it turns out that an alien, last of his race and dying, discovered this mirror Egyptian world and found that he could inhabit the bodies of its residents and thus sustain his life indefinitely. To maximize the serviceability, he took the bodies of young boys (cf., the boy pharaohs of Egypt), discarding them and inhabiting other bodies as he had need. To the indigenous people of the planet, he appeared a god – powerful, mysterious, and terrible. Dressed in the same royal garb of earth’s pharaohs, the alien was both god and king to the primitive peoples of this outer world, the personification of the sun, which they called Ra, whose symbol, the eye of Ra, they revered. Mimicking the pyramid-like space ship in which the alien traveled, they built a pyramid as a temple in which to meet this “god” when he summoned them, and from which, in their primitive imaginations, he took his flight to other worlds. One of those other worlds was, of course, earth. Using the stargate he had created, the alien settled residents from this “out world” on the Giza Plateau in Egypt and exported his religion there so as to insure a steady supply of bodies to inhabit when he had need of them. This, of course, is intended to explain one of the oldest mysteries of antiquity; namely, the fact that the Sphinx and the Pyramids of Giza are much older than the civilizations that are credited with their construction, and that the science used to build them is still, in many ways, beyond even modern comprehension or ability. According to the story, the pyramids, 10,000 years old on the dating of most Egyptologists, were already very old when the oldest of the Egyptian dynasties flourished 5,000 years ago because this alien taught the immigrants from the other world how to build them, their descendants millennia later becoming the ancient Egyptians we know from earth antiquity.

The stargate on the earth side of the connecting portal was destroyed, so it seems, when a revolt occurred among earth’s population of Ra worshipers, overthrowing the ancient religion of the “pharaoh-gods” and destroying the stargate (the biblical Exodus?). The religion of the pharaohs vanished and the portal was forgotten, until rediscovered in the excavations of 1928.

The rest of the movie is about an exodus on this outer world and the defeat and destruction of the alien “pharaoh-god” who subjugated and exploited its people. To be sure, the exodus imagery of the movie could be mined with profit both for preaching and story-telling (the heroism and indomibility of subjugated and exploited peoples, etc.), but the text of the sermon constrains my interest elsewhere, namely, to the stargate, the portal which connects our world to “another world” and through which incursions from time to time occur. It is an apt metaphor for explaining biblical eschatology and the epiphany it assumes and

will help me to connect up in the audience's mind the pervasiveness of this imagery in literature, in cinema, in story, and in our collective consciousness. And so, the *Stargate* will serve as an interesting and useful "point of entry" into our sermon. Though the movie is too complex to recount in the sermon in much detail, just a few "brush strokes" is all that will be needed to suggest the image which will serve both as the "point of entry" into our sermon and as the guiding metaphor by means of which the sermon will "unpack" the Transfiguration for the audience.



## The Sermon

Did you see the movie *Stargate*? Wonderful movie, especially if, like me, you're fascinated with both ancient history and science fiction. The movie deftly wedges these two into a story that is at once entertaining and provocative. Actually, the premise of the story comes right off the front pages of the latest archaeological journals, if you read that kind of stuff. [I confess I do, though I'm not proud of it. I tried to give it up when I became a dean, but alas it keeps beckoning me like the sirens of Odysseus. So now I'm trying to "taper off" slowly by reading *Biblical Archaeological Review*.]

In any case, there was a recent story about the three pyramids of Giza. These pyramids have puzzled archaeologists for years, for two reasons chiefly. The first is that the three pyramids are not of equal size. The first two are virtually identical while the third is significantly smaller. The second reason is that the third, smaller pyramid is also out of alignment with the other two. The three appear to have been constructed to be in line with each other, but the third, small pyramid is significantly off-set from the other two.

Finally, in exasperation, two astronomers were called in to consult on the matter. When they looked at the three pyramids, immediately they asked: "Do you have any aerial photographs of the pyramids?" Puzzled, the archaeologists said: "Sure, but why would you want *aerial* photographs?" They said: "Just a hunch." When the astronomers saw the aerial photos, instantly they said: "There it is!" The archaeologists said: "There *what* is?" The astronomers said: "Orion, of course!" And when the archaeologists looked at the aerial photographs of the three pyramids, they formed a perfect outline of Orion's belt – the two large pyramids obviously mimicking the two bright stars of Orion's belt, and the small pyramid, slightly offset from the other two mimicking the smaller, third star of Orion's belt, slightly offset from the two brighter stars.

Well, the movie *Stargate* extended that premise into an exodus-like story by suggesting that a visitor from another world had instructed the ancient Egyptians in building the pyramids to be "extraterrestrial road signs" of a sort to guide them in their journeys to and from earth. [Incidentally, it is widely recognized that the pyramids were not only tombs for the pharaohs, but were also "launching pads" of sorts for them on their "other worldly journeys."] During excavations at Giza, so the movie suggests, a portal was discovered with some hieroglyphs inscribed upon it which, when deciphered, turned out not to be



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hieroglyphs at all but a map of constellations – star charts which when properly locked in transformed the portal into a “stargate” through which one could actually pass into another world!

Now if that sounds vaguely familiar to you, it should. The idea that “there’s more here than meets the eye,” and that if we could just find the door, marvelous journeys into other worlds would unfold before us, is a common theme of a great deal of literature and not a few movies. It is, of course, the premise of Lewis Carroll’s *Through the Looking Glass*, and C. S. Lewis’ *The Chronicles of Narnia*, as well as the recent movie, *The Matrix*, just to name three. In *Through the Looking Glass* the vehicle through which one traverses from this world to another is a mirror. In *Chronicles*, it is a wardrobe. In *The Matrix*, one takes a “waking pill” to awaken from the computer-generated sleep we call “life” into the “real world.”

This concept that, if we knew where to look for it, we could find a “window onto another world” is also the theme of one of the most curious and fascinating stories in the entire New Testament, the Transfiguration of Jesus.

In Luke’s version of the story, the Transfiguration is a direct response to two questions regarding Jesus’ identity. The first question is put by Herod Antipas upon hearing that Jesus had taken up, as it were, the preaching gauntlet of John the Baptist, and fearing that Jesus was somehow John come back to haunt him, says: “John I beheaded; but who is this about whom I hear such things?” The second question regarding Jesus’ identity is put by Jesus himself to his disciples: “But who do you say that I am?” When Simon Peter answers for the group, “You are God’s Messiah,” Jesus responds by predicting that as Messiah he will be rejected by his people, “suffer many things,” and finally be put to death on the cross. Then, as though He had been listening in on the conversation, God offers his own answer to the question of Jesus’ identity in the form of an *epiphany* we call “The Transfiguration.”

Though all three Synoptics describe the scene, Luke’s version is distinctive, especially in its heavy use of Old Testament imagery, especially Exodus imagery. Notice, only Luke says that the Transfiguration happened “as they were praying,” that is, seeking the presence [an audience?] of God. Suddenly, Luke says, Jesus’ face, *and clothes* curiously enough, were altered, becoming “dazzling white” with glory. He is transformed before their eyes into something of an “altered state,” says Luke. And Moses and Elijah (the Law and the Prophets) appeared, Luke says, “in glory” talking with Jesus. Only Luke among the Synoptics tells us what they were talking about – “and they spoke of this *exodus* which he was about to accomplish in Jerusalem.” Not his “departure” as the RSV has it, but *exodus*, an explicit allusion to the OT Exodus in which Israel was set free from Egyptian slavery, and an oblique reference to Jesus’ impending death which will set the *new* People of God free from a slavery of a different kind. And only Luke tells us that the disciples were “heavy with sleep” as peering into a “dream world.” Did they *really* see it, or was it all a dream? And Luke says a “cloud overshadowed them; and they were afraid as they entered it.” As you know, the cloud is the standard Old Testament image for the *Shekinah* YHWH,

the "glory" of God. One could not actually see God, only his "aura" as it were, his *Shekinah*, his "glory," hence the disciples' fear. Luke is deliberately casting his story in the imagery of the Exodus, and specifically Moses' encounter with the *Shekinah* YHWH on Horeb's heights, an encounter, you will recall, that left Moses' face shining with the residue of "Glory" because he had been with God. So like Moses before him, Jesus ascends the mountain and passes through to the "other side," permitting the bleary-eyed disciples to "glimpse the glory," even though momentarily, of Jesus' true identity. It's an epiphany, an eschatological "breakthrough," a "metaphor moment" as I've called it elsewhere, of the blinding, radiant Presence and Glory of God.



But what does it all mean, these "glimpses of glory," these epiphanies of the presence of God in our lives? C. S. Lewis has helped us here, I think. In his little book, *Miracles*, Lewis argues compellingly that biblical miracles are of two types – "miracles of the old creation" and "miracles of the new creation." "Miracles of the old creation" are those events in which God does close and small, suddenly and locally, what He does everyday through the whole process of the natural order, but on a scale so grand that no one much notices.

For example, when Jesus heals a leper, he's not violating the laws of nature, he's focusing them, concentrating them, localizing them. All healing is, in the final analysis, *divine* healing. The physician's role is but to accelerate the body's own natural [God-given, I would add] healing processes, or to remove that which inhibits health and wholeness. But no physician, strictly speaking, heals anyone. And no one who doesn't want to be healed is ever healed, without their knowledge or consent. Ever hear of a doctor healing a cut on a corpse? No. Health is ultimately God's gift, not our achievement.

"Miracles of the new creation," Lewis says, are those epiphanies, those "metaphor moments" when a New World "breaks through" revealing itself. Another world, Transcendence itself, is pulled like a blanket over ordinary time and ordinary history and then, from time-to-time, spikes down through it revealing itself and thereby transforming the ordinary into the extraordinary.

Tom Long, Bandy Professor of Preaching at Emory University, tells about one of these "metaphor moments."<sup>12</sup> He says that when his little daughter was about eight or nine years old, she began taking ballet lessons. She loved ballet, but she'd drive them all nuts wanting to perform for them at the slightest provocation.

Tom says that one warm, sunny Saturday he was sitting in his office at home working on a manuscript already late to the publisher. Suddenly, his eight year old daughter burst into the room and started dancing right in front of her daddy while he was working.

Realizing that she was not getting anywhere in garnering an audience, she started calling to him, trying to get his attention away from his work:

"Daddy, Daddy, watch me! Watch me, Daddy!"

Tom, never looking up from his work, smiled and said, "That's nice, Honey."





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Undeterred, she kept on calling to him: "Daddy, watch me!"

Finally, exasperated, Tom looked up from his work and caught a glimpse of his daughter, dancing in front of the window, with the sun streaming in like a spotlight on his dancing daughter.

Suddenly, as she attempted a pirouette, her hair caught the sunlight just right, and she tossed her head to one side her hair followed as though in slow motion, and for a moment, Tom says, time seemed to stop.

Suddenly, his daughter was no longer a little freckled-faced eight year old. She was a beautiful young woman, confident, poised, without the slightest speck of self-consciousness, lost in dance, lost in the moment.

And Tom says that in that moment, time-past and time-present and time-to-come all collapsed into a single moment called "Eternity" in which another world broke through making our notions of "time" in the ordinary sense seem almost quaint by comparison.

And then she turned again, and it was gone! And there was his little eight year old daughter again, calling to him: "Are you watching, Daddy?"

But for one shining moment, he had "glimpsed the glory" that was to be.

The Transfiguration is a miracle of the new creation, a "glimpse of glory" that reminds us that there's more here than meets the eye, that the prosaic and the pedestrian are not the whole story, that every now and then "holiness" shines through the "humanness" and we see it all clearly if not fully. Every now and again it happens that way and we "glimpse the glory," and those glimpses, though fragmentary and ephemeral, can make all the difference.

Frederick Buechner tells a story about one of these "metaphor moments."<sup>13</sup> He says that one spring in Vermont where he lives he was walking with a friend through a stand of maple trees at sugaring time. The sap buckets were hung from the trees, and if you were quiet, you could hear the sap dripping into them: all through the woods, if you kept still, you could hear the hushed drip-dropping of the sap into a thousand buckets or more hung out in the early spring woods with the sun coming down in long shafts of lights through the trees. The sap of a maple is like rainwater, very soft, and almost without taste except for the faintest tinge of sweetness to it, and when his friend said he'd never tasted it, Buechner offered to give him a taste. Buechner had to unhook the bucket from the tap to hold it for him, and when he bent his head down to drink from it, Buechner tipped the bucket down to his lips, and just as he was about to take a sip from the lifeblood of a tree, he looked up at Buechner and said, "Shouldn't you be saying some words or something?"

"And they spoke of his *exodus* which he was to accomplish in Jerusalem.

Sometimes it happens that way, and we "glimpse the glory" and suddenly we see it all clearly, if not fully—who he really is, and who we really are, and what, in him, we can really be.

But the cross comes before the crown, and tomorrow is a Monday morning. And I predict that by midweek, life will have settled over you like a gray fog on a winter's dawn, and the golden shafts of Sunday's glory will have given way to the sackcloth and ashes of Wednesday's shame.

I remind you: you can't get to Easter without going through Lent, because finally, there can be no resurrection until somebody dies. It's the way of things in this world.

But while we can't "pitch our tent" and live in the light, we *can* remember that we "glimpsed the glory"; we've seen the portal; we know the way. We can follow the "Shining Face."

And while that may not be everything, it's enough . . . for now.



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<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Eugene Lowry, *The Sermon: Dancing the Edge of Mystery* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1997), esp. 11-38, and Cornelius Plantinga, Jr. "Dancing the Edge of Mystery: The New Homiletics Celebrates Pilgrimage, Not Propositions, *Books & Culture* (September/October 1999): 16-19.

<sup>2</sup> Lowry, 15-28.

<sup>3</sup> Ed Gray, "How to Watch a Movie," *Attaché* (March 1999): 58-64.

<sup>4</sup> Gray, 62.

<sup>5</sup> Gray, 61-62.

<sup>6</sup> Gray, 62.

<sup>7</sup> This is sometimes called "audience criticism" and is particularly useful, along with standard historical criticism, in the reconstruction of the historical situation of the audience being addressed by the document under consideration. In addition to the standard commentaries such as Joseph Fitzmyer's *Anchor Bible Commentary, Vols. 28 & 28A* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1981), see also David Tiede's *Luke in the Augsburg Commentary on the New Testament* series, William Kurz's *Reading Luke-Acts: Dynamics of Biblical Narrative*, and Charles Talbert's *Reading Luke: A Literary and Theological Commentary on the Third Gospel*.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Tiede, 27.

<sup>9</sup> Talbert, 102.

<sup>10</sup> I've heard Will use this imagery on numerous occasions, but if he has published it anywhere, I am unaware of it.

<sup>11</sup> A Centropolis/Carolco production; Mario Kassa, executive producer; Dean Devlin and Roland Emmerich, screenplay, 1994.

<sup>12</sup> I have heard Tom tell this story on several occasions, though if he has published it anywhere, I am unaware of it.

<sup>13</sup> *A Room Called Remember* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1984), 95-96.