

Seeing the Light

A sermon delivered by the Rev. Roger Scott Powers
at St. Andrew Presbyterian Church in Albuquerque,
on Sunday, February 14, 2021.

Mark 9:2-9
2 Corinthians 4:3-6

This morning's reading from Mark describes an experience of Jesus and three of his disciples -- an experience known as "the Transfiguration." As the story goes, Jesus took his inner circle of disciples -- Peter, James, and John -- up to the top of "a high mountain apart, by themselves." There, they were given a glimpse of Jesus' future glory as the risen Christ.

The text says "Jesus was transfigured before them, with clothes that became dazzling white, such as no one on earth could bleach them." The version of the story in Matthew's gospel says Jesus' "face shone like the sun, and his clothes became dazzling white."

I imagine this heavenly light being so bright as to be blinding, like the light generated when you burn magnesium. I remember having the opportunity to burn a ribbon of magnesium in my high school chemistry class. Some of you have probably had the same experience. If you've ever witnessed it, you don't easily forget it. Magnesium burns with a brilliant white light that is so bright you have to avert your eyes. Disposable flash bulbs that photographers once used were made with magnesium. And the element is still used in flares and fireworks today.

Jesus glowed before his three disciples with a transcendent glory reserved for heavenly beings. They now saw that Jesus was no ordinary man, for divine light was shining through him. And if that weren't enough, Moses and Elijah then both appeared before them, talking with Jesus. The three disciples were terrified by what they were witnessing. Peter didn't know what to say. He babbled something to Jesus about it being good that they were there and that maybe they should construct three tents: one for Jesus, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.

But then a cloud overshadowed them, and a voice from the cloud said: "This is my Child, the Beloved; to this one you shall listen!" The next thing they knew, Moses (representing the law) and Elijah (representing the prophets) had both vanished as quickly as they had appeared. And Jesus stood alone before them as the one who would be the fulfillment of God's work as represented by the Hebrew scriptures.

Needless to say, the disciples were completely overwhelmed by this whole experience. Jesus had been transfigured before their very eyes with divine light. They had witnessed a visitation from Moses and Elijah. And they had heard the voice of what must have been God. It was awesome and terrifying all at the same time!

The Transfiguration may be a difficult story for many of us to hear. It's not a story to which we can easily relate. It doesn't fit with our everyday experience. But, of course,

it's not supposed to fit with our everyday experience. It didn't fit into the disciples' everyday experience either. It was an extraordinary manifestation of the transforming power of God. It was and is a tremendous mystery to which we respond with awe and wonder and worship.

The apostle Paul, in his letter to the Corinthians, also takes up the imagery of light in reference to God and Jesus Christ. Paul writes: "It is the God who said, 'Let light shine out of darkness,'" -- that is, the God who created the universe -- "who has shone in our hearts." It is through "the face of Jesus Christ" that we receive "the light of the knowledge of the glory of God." "Seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ," is to see "the image of God." In other words, Jesus Christ is our window to divinity. It is through him that we see God most clearly.

There is an odd and curious coincidence in speaking about Christ as light. It is that both Christ and light have dual natures. Scientists tell us that light acts as both a wave and a particle. It is not either/or but both/and. Similarly, theologians tell us that Jesus, the light of the world, also has two natures. He is both fully human and fully divine.

The beginning of John's gospel also speaks of Jesus Christ in terms of light. It refers to Jesus as "the true light . . . coming into the world": "What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it. There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light. The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world."

Our ability to see things depends on the presence of light. Without light, we can see absolutely nothing. We need light to be able to see. It's true in a physical sense, just as it is true in a spiritual sense. As Christians, our light comes from the Son (spelled S-O-N) -- God's Son -- Jesus Christ. He is the light of the world. He is the true light that enlightens every human being.

It is by the light of Christ, that we are able to see the world with new vision and clarity. By the light of Christ, those who are ostracized, marginalized, rejected, come into focus as children of God, deserving of our love and acceptance. By the light of Christ, the drug addict in the park becomes our brother, and the prostitute on the street corner becomes our sister. By the light of Christ, undocumented immigrants and refugees become our neighbors, and enemies become our friends. The light of Christ helps us to see ourselves and others in new ways and opens up the possibility of transformed relationships.

As followers of Christ, we are to be bearers of the light of Christ. "You are the light of the world," Jesus says in the Sermon on the Mount. The light of Christ shines through us out into the world. We are to be like a city set on a hill. There's no hiding a city set on a hill. We are to be like a lamp on a lampstand, giving light to all. We are to let our light shine before others.

How do we go about letting our light shine in the world? Chapter 58 of Isaiah, one of the readings for Ash Wednesday, gives us some help: "Is not this the fast that I choose:

to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover them, and not to hide yourself from your own kin? *Then your light shall break forth like the dawn. . . . If you remove the yoke from among you, the pointing of the finger, the speaking of evil, if you offer your food to the hungry and satisfy the needs of the afflicted, then your light shall rise in the darkness and your gloom be like the noonday.*"

Later this week, we enter into the season of Lent, a period of 40 days and 6 Sundays, beginning on Ash Wednesday and culminating in Holy Week. It is a time for personal reflection and prayer, a time for soul-searching and spiritual redirection. It's a time for opening ourselves to the transforming power of God in Jesus Christ, that we might become more Christ-like and reflect the image of God more clearly. It's a time to turn our lives around and begin living in new ways, a time to renew our faith and recommit ourselves to following the way of Christ.

But before we embark on that Lenten journey, the story of the Transfiguration of the Lord gives us a glimpse of where the journey will eventually end -- not in death, but in new life, in the resurrection of Jesus Christ. The Transfiguration gives us strength for the journey, a vision of transformation to hold before us as we seek to be transformed ourselves. Amen.