

As a Lamp Shining in a Dark Place

John Wilkinson

The Presbyterian Church of Chestnut Hill

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2 Peter 1:16-21 and Matthew 17:1-9 (Transfiguration)

When is something too much of a good thing? Perhaps it is too many Girl Scout cookies – thin mints, possibly. Perhaps it is too many episodes of your favorite binge-able TV show – for us it is “The Crown,” when we will look at each other, bleary-eyed, and say “just one more.” Some “too muches” are benign; others, not so much.

When is something too much of a good thing? In these gray days of quasi-winter, we crave light. Can there be too much light?

When you turn a corner and drive into the sun and there is that instantaneous panic and you can't see a thing. Or the dentist, peering into your open mouth, shifts just a bit and his headlamp blinds you and you see those little float-y things for another 10 minutes.

Or here. I love the elegant, simplistic beauty of this space. But there are moments, when the sun hits just right, and people are blinded by the light, as Bruce Springsteen sang. Blinded by the light, so we utilize the window shades to actually keep the welcome sunlight out.

All light all the time is not good – there is, in fact, something called light pollution – we live with it, the constant and continual presence of human-made light, even at night, that fundamentally alters natural conditions and compromises health, disrupts ecosystems and spoils aesthetic environments.

Barbara Brown Taylor reminds us that the Milky Way is “now invisible to two-thirds of those living in the United States.” “Darkness,” Taylor writes, “turns out to be as essential to our physical well-being as light. We not only need plenty of darkness to sleep well; we also need it to *be* well. The circadian rhythm of waking and sleeping matches the natural cycle of day and night, which affects everything

from our body chemistry to our relationships.” (*Learning to Walk in the Dark*, pages 59-61)

We can look at faith in many ways. One way is through this lens – light and dark, dark and light.

God’s first act of creation: “Then God said, ‘Let there be light’; and there was light. And God saw that the light was good; and God separated the light from the darkness. God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And there was evening and there was morning, the first day.” (Genesis 1:3-5)

Isaiah tells us that “The people who walked in darkness
have seen a great light;
those who lived in a land of deep darkness—
on them light has shined.”

Jesus is the light, John’s gospel tells us, “and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.”

“You are the light of the world,” Jesus tells us.

There are countless more, so many that we could write a narrative of faith with light and dark as the theme. We could do the same linking big biblical events – from creation itself to Moses and the burning bush to the star above the manger to the light of the empty tomb.

And we cannot forget the event we rehearse this morning. It is called the Transfiguration; such an important biblical event that it gets its own day in the liturgical calendar, as we pivot from the end of Epiphany to the beginning of Lent in just a few days.

The Greek word for “transfiguration” signifies how critical this is to Jesus’ developing story – “*metamorphosis*” – a complete physical transformation. You Harry Potter fans will remember a Hogwarts class called “transfiguration,” where students were taught spells with wand movements that would change the appearance of an object or an animal or even a person. Professor McGonagall herself taught transfiguration.

This is no magic. Matthew's version of the Transfiguration has Jesus taking three disciples with him up a hill. He is suddenly transfigured, changed, transformed – his face is shining; his clothing is bright white. Suddenly, again, two other figures appear – Moses and Elijah, no bigger icons from the tradition. Peter and James and John kind of freak out. They propose building three little structures to capture the gathering. In the midst of that misguided proposal a voice booms out, identifying Jesus. The freaking out is ratcheted up and the disciples fall to the ground. Jesus tells them to get up and not to be afraid. When they do, no voice, no lights, no Moses and Elijah. Just Jesus. They return down the mountain and Jesus commands them not to tell a soul about any of this.

The Transfiguration story is central to understanding who Jesus is. God's beloved, clearly, words that we heard first just a few weeks ago when he was baptized. The appearance of Moses – representing the law – and Elijah – representing the prophets, indicates continuity with the Hebrew tradition, not rejecting it, but embracing and fulfilling it.

So the Transfiguration is about Jesus, clearly. But it is also about us. How we respond on top of the mountain and how we respond when we come down from our mountaintop experience. I have been to great conferences – as a youth and as an adult. You have powerful emotional experiences, connect with people in new ways. And then you return home. You want to capture that experience every day, but you know you can't. In the same way that we know we can't always live with the bright lights, that every moment can't be on the mountaintop. What happens when we come down the mountain? What happens in the dark?

An unfamiliar book later in the New Testament – 2 Peter – helps us, not a letter to a particular church, a la Paul, but a more general epistle, attributed to the very Peter who was on that mountaintop.

Peter refers to this event, and tells us to rely on it, remember it, “as a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts.”

Dwight Peterson writes that for Peter, “the eschatological (that's the fancy word for Jesus' return) hopes of Christians have profound ethical consequences. In other words, the expectation of Christ's return makes (or ought to make) a difference in the day to day lives of those of us who expect it. That difference,”

Peterson says, “is in how we live.” Peterson writes that the Transfiguration should have “significant daily behavioral consequences which (ought to) distinguish Christians from an unholy world.”

Having been up the mountain with Jesus, having experienced the light, our lives should be different when we come down to the reality of every-day life, which can include versions of those mountaintop moments, fleeting, but can also include episodes of darkness, when the light fades.

These are two images, I know, images of coming down the mountain back to real life and images of darkness as symbols of that same real life. But transfiguration seems to link them, that the bright lights fade when we come down the mountain, and we experience not only the every-day, but the difficult. We know that faith is about the every-day, how we live our lives in ordinary moments as well as extraordinary ones. Yet it is also about when we find ourselves in the dark places as well as the brightly illumined ones. Great theologians have written about the “dark night of the soul,” and we know what that can look like, each of us, and how faith matters.

Perhaps you saw an essay in the *Times* by Maria Browning just a few days ago, called “In Search of Darkness.” Browning says that “in a world where everything is illuminated, something essential is lost...I step outside my door and stare at the bank of round-the-clock lights from the new houses that have been built on a nearby hillside — potent blue LED lights that assault the eye, even from 100 yards away. I try hard to make peace with the presence of those lights, to see them as cozy reminders of human presence, as *neighbors*, with all the warm associations that can, at least potentially, entail. And I can’t help seeing it as a problem. I crave the night so much, miss it *so much*. This feeling grows in me with every year that passes, and not only because the lights have become increasingly hard to escape. Something in me is changing, and it’s not just the lights that have become intolerable but the driven, narcissistic mode of life they accompany. Something deep within me recoils from it all and longs to turn toward darkness.”

We come down the mountain and face real life. We turn off the bright lights and face darkness. Real life offers wonderful moments and darkness offers clarity. But real life can also offer struggles and challenges and darkness can simply be a difficult circumstance for us to navigate. All of that is life. Too much light is not a

good thing; but neither is too much darkness. It's why we need the Transfiguration. But it is also why we need Lent.

David Lose writes that “when all is over -- when Moses and Elijah are gone, the voice is quiet, Jesus' face and clothing have returned to normal, and the disciples are left in holy awe -- all that is left is Jesus... When all else fades -- and indeed, soon enough all will become dark indeed -- yet Jesus remains, reaching out in help and healing...Most of us,” Lose writes, “have had mountain top experiences and can testify to their importance to our lives. But all of us have also had to return to the valley. At both places, and all those in between, Jesus is there, reaching out to raise us to life again.”

Trusting that Jesus is there is called faith. It's easier when the spectacular happens; but faith is as powerful if not more so in the darkness, in our darkest moments. Rowan Williams, former Archbishop of Canterbury, writes that by enduring and living through the darkness , “discovering what it can do to our faith and our love...we shall finally understand the night of the spirit...The light is at the heart of the dark, the dawn breaks when we have entered fully into the night.” (“The Dark Night,” in *Ray of Darkness*, page 84)

Enduring the dark as we come down the mountain is highly personal and individual. Your darkness will be yours and mine will be mine. Yet the resources of faith are available to each of us. Brene Brown writes that “Only when we are brave enough to explore the darkness will we discover the infinite power of our light.” I believe that. But I also believe that we as a church, or we as a culture, or we as a global community, come down the mountain and endure the dark. It has many faces and names – racism, sexism, poverty, injustice, oppression. And faith as a resource becomes available to all of us, not only to help us navigate the darkness, but to help us move toward the light.

There is an old adage that sunlight is the best disinfectant, but I believe that Martin Luther King, Jr. said it better, that “Darkness cannot drive out darkness: only light can do that.” We experience that transforming light this day on a mountain top, and we carry it with us wherever we go – the light of Christ – *lumen Christi* – day or night, celebration or sorrow, to rely on it, to lean into it, “as a lamp shining in a dark place.” Amen.