

Transfiguration of our Lord, A
Exodus 24:12-18
2 Peter 1:16-21
Matthew 17:1-9

Pastor Melinda J. Wagner
First Immanuel Lutheran Church
Portland, Oregon
February 23, 2020

One beautiful phrase leaps out at me from Second Peter: *“Be attentive to this as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts.”* I don’t know about you, but I’ve been needing a shining lamp just lately. In many and various dark places of life, I’ve been searching for light – and how beautiful it is to be reminded that Jesus IS the light, for all of us. Being attentive to Christ is what gets us through every dark time.

Each of our scriptures points to that vision of Jesus transfigured and shining on the mountaintop. When I was younger, I understood this vision a bit differently than I do now. I had experienced Christian retreats and times of prayer when Jesus *shone* for me, and I was excited about following a Lord who radiates dazzling light on high! But with the passing of years, I’ve learned that faith is not mostly about mountaintop experiences. Faith is more often about seeking Christ’s light in all the shadowy places. Like holding onto a lantern as you navigate the winding tunnels of an underground cave. Or focusing on the candle flame when the electricity has gone out. And Christ’s light, whether we perceive it as bright or dim, never does go out. Christ’s light always guides us.

Peter, James and John learned this on the mountain. They were the inner circle of disciples, the first ones to drop everything and follow Jesus. And they believed they’d picked a winner, someone to give them a beautiful future. But no sooner did Peter recognize Jesus as Messiah, the Promised One, then Jesus entrusted them with hard truths. He explained there was suffering in his future, and theirs too. He would be killed. Their path following him would mean sacrifice and struggle, taking up their own crosses. It wasn’t what they expected or hoped for. The warning left them confused, in shock, questioning their choices and their teacher.

So in God’s wisdom, in Jesus’ love, they were given an incredible vision to see them through this hard reality. It wasn’t so much that Jesus changed there on the mountain, but rather that Peter and James and John were granted for one beautiful moment to see Jesus as he truly was. Shining with God’s full glory. There on the mountain it was plain to see that Jesus was the real thing. Divine. Of God. Standing in the line of Moses, who

received the commandments on God's mountain, and the great prophet Elijah, who heard God's still small voice on a mountain too.

The transfiguration was a moment of dazzling clarity, when the disciples saw what is real. They didn't understand it yet, but it became a reference point in hard days to come. Because Jesus' predictions came true, and conflict developed around him, and they followed him to the cross, and through all that they were meant to stay tuned in to the confusing but unforgettable vision on the mountain. As they encountered human pain in their everyday work - casting out demons, helping people with debilitating diseases, surrounded by crowds with needs too great for them to ever meet -- they recalled Jesus shining on the mountain and knew at a deep level that they were still on the right track, following him. They knew God's glory was alive in Jesus -- even when they could not see it. And later on, after the resurrection, they understood more completely. Because on Easter they saw God's full glory break the very chains of death. They saw that the dark tomb could not hold Jesus the Christ. As the Easter sun rose, Jesus rose -- revealing that he was so much more than a teacher, he was their Savior, and our Savior. Our light and life, our hope and our joy.

The mountaintop vision is not only for Peter and James and John. It is for us, too. For us to remember how truly brilliant our Savior is, at all times, whether we are able to perceive it or not. To show us how vibrantly and fiercely Jesus our Savior shines -- with goodness, love, holiness, and just the pure energy of God. God the Creator who brought all things to being. God who keeps on energizing this universe every day with compassion, grace, and courageous justice. When darkness is all around us, when we are stumbling, the glory of God in Christ lights our way.

Darkness is real, there's no denying it. We see human pain on the sidewalk here at church every day, women waiting to enter Rose Haven shelter, struggling with mental illness and all kinds of demons. People camping out on the street, brought low by poverty, often mixed in with illness or addiction, their bridges burned and options played out and nowhere else to go. It's a portrait of desperation.

No one can deny that our national climate is stressful and difficult, too. A great many people are apprehensive or angry or even fearful. There's a general sense that the ground is not firm beneath our feet, that assumptions we have long carried about how government works, how news is reported, even what America stands for -- are being called into question. It's a tumultuous time, and the pressure hovers even as we go about the pressing challenges of our ordinary lives, tending to loved ones, making important decisions, dealing with financial struggles, job issues, handling all the responsibilities of living as faithful people.

So many forces and circumstances threaten to cloud our perception of God's goodness and love and presence. So in God's wisdom, and in Jesus' love – we are given a vision to see us through the difficult realities we face. The vision of Jesus revealed in glory on the mountaintop. And we are called to be attentive to this, "as to a lamp shining in a dark place."

And when we are attentive to Christ, in all his brilliant splendor-- what do we see? What do we hear? A wise pastor points out that we hear three words, spoken by God on the mountain. Three words: *Listen to him! Get up! And, Do not be afraid.* (Special thanks to David Lose, In the Meantime, 2/22/17, davidlose.net)

The first word: "Listen to him!" Pay attention to our Savior. In worship, in prayer, in reflection, lifting every one of our concerns before God. Listen to him. Be as attentive to our Lord as we are to our cell phones, social media feed, the latest scandalous events. Be as attentive to God's good news as we are to the bad news and sad news and painful realities that drag us down. The best way to understand God is to look to Jesus and listen to him. For Jesus says, the kingdom of God is at hand! There is so much more to this world than you may see. God is alive, moving, saving, restoring, at every moment. Notice how often Jesus prays – it's a lot! Notice who Jesus hangs out with - the outcasts. Notice his manner, which is all about extending God's kingdom, reaching out with God's love, healing, and forgiveness. It's been observed that "we may not all agree (in this nation, even in this congregation)... but when we all keep trying to listen to Jesus together... we get closer to what God intends for us." (D. Lose) Listen to him!

The second word from the mountain is "Get up"-- which in Greek mean "be raised up" or even "be resurrected." The disciples have fallen down in fear – but God says, get up! Get going! For us today, this might mean, don't stay stuck. Let God lift you up and get you moving. Let God give you the energy and the will and guidance to take action – out of love, out of mercy, out of compassion and justice. Don't give in to paralysis or cynicism – do some thing, however small, to let the light of Christ shine through you. Get up. Be raised up!

The final word on the mountain is "Do not be afraid." And that's a big one. Because fear is insidious. But God has not created us for fear. God has created us for confidence and courage. God has created us to trust and live boldly, in Jesus' name, *especially* in uncertain times. "And because God is God of the past, present, and future, we need not fear... It doesn't mean we won't have troubles, but when we trust God for our good, then it is not fear that controls us, it is love and hope. God didn't create us for death, but for resurrection. God doesn't want us to be afraid but to move forward. To love in

the face of hate. Because love and life are always stronger than hate and death. And God will be with us every step of the way.” (D. Lose) Do not be afraid.

Friends in Christ, there is so much more to this life than we can readily see. With the first disciples, we hold onto that clear shining vision of Christ on the mountain. We make it our reference point in tumultuous and troubling days. Because we may be confused, but God is not. God always stands for grace, love, justice and peace, for decency and for truth. Our Lord always stands for loving the neighbor, welcoming the stranger, unity in the human family, justice, compassion, serving others, and sacrificial love. Christ still stands for these things, and seeing him shining on that mountain, we know for certain that this is who we are too. Like the disciples, we know on a deep level that we are on the right track in following Jesus, our shining light, God’s purest revelation, the Savior who shows us the way.

Sisters and brothers, let us *be attentive to Christ as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until God’s day dawns and the morning star rises in our hearts.* In Christ’s name, Amen.