

## Blinded by the Light

A Sermon preached by the Rev. J. Thomas Buchanan on February 27, 2022

Friendship Presbyterian Church

*Now about eight days after these sayings Jesus took with him Peter and John and James, and went up on the mountain to pray. And while he was praying, the appearance of his face changed, and his clothes became dazzling white. Suddenly they saw two men, Moses and Elijah, talking to him. They appeared in glory and were speaking of his departure, which he was about to accomplish at Jerusalem. Now Peter and his companions were weighed down with sleep; but since they had stayed awake, they saw his glory and the two men who stood with him. Just as they were leaving him, Peter said to Jesus, 'Master, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah'—not knowing what he said. While he was saying this, a cloud came and overshadowed them; and they were terrified as they entered the cloud. Then from the cloud came a voice that said, 'This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!' When the voice had spoken, Jesus was found alone. And they kept silent, and in those days told no one any of the things they had seen. (Luke 9:28-36, NRSV)*

In many of our greatest and most memorable stories – ones that stay with us – a theme that emerges again and again is that of light shining in the midst of darkness ... light which enables seeing clearly ... light which inspires hope.

Today, on this last Sunday before the season of Lent, we might seem to have before us just such a story. It's the story of the *Transfiguration* – the time that Jesus took his disciples Peter, James, and John up the mountain, where they experienced a vision of their Master *shining* before them and standing with Moses and Elijah! For all the light in it, it's certainly one of the *strangest* stories in the Bible, but as we'll see, it's also one of the most *human*.

One of the very last sermons I preached as an Associate Pastor, before becoming a head of staff for the first time, was one based on this text. It was a remarkable time of transition in my life, when so many things were ending and so many more things were just beginning. And so, I guess I've long associated the transfiguration story with times of change.

Of course, this text also marks a transition point in our *worship* life together. I wouldn't blame you if you weren't keeping up with the liturgical calendar, especially with so many things in the world so unsettled, so chaotic. But we've been wandering through these Sundays after Epiphany for the past several weeks, with our series on Jesus' parables ... in a way, still coming down from our Christmas high. Christmas and Epiphany are seasons of light and glory. But next Sunday the Lenten season begins ... a quieter season, a season of listening and waiting, of remembering and hoping, all moving towards Good Friday and the Easter light beyond.

In fact, this story *itself* is about transition. The transfiguration event is one of the key transition points in the gospels, a point at which everything turns. Jesus' time of preaching and healing is soon coming to an end, and Jesus knows it. Things would continue looking bright for a little

while longer, but he knew it couldn't last, for Jerusalem loomed on the horizon. There, he knew that the skies would turn greyer and darker, and he would confront the political and religious powers of his day, and together they would extinguish him – leaving his followers and all who trusted in him on the brink of despair.

Of course, in our own time, we all have become overly well-acquainted with transition, endings and beginnings, over the last two years, to the point that we may feel emotionally zapped, unable even to throw words at the world anymore. We know we're caught even now in the midst of massive transitions, and we don't know at all where things are headed.

With respect to COVID, we want to return to “normal,” but we sort of also know that the new “normal” won't be quite the same. And now, with the Russian invasion of Ukraine and the threat of a much larger war and the human suffering and the economic and political instability that goes with it, we long for a return to peace, but don't see how that will happen. We see the skies quickly darkening, and we long for the light.

In many ways, it's a relief to focus on things much smaller, the more mundane and reliable transitions that make up the pattern of our lives. Children grow up and their childhood slips through our fingers like water. We grow up, too, and our hopes and dreams and expectations all rise and fall and rise again. We find joy, and sadness, too. We fall in love, we fall out of love; marriages come together and sometimes fall apart. We get jobs, we lose jobs, we get new jobs. Our health comes and goes. We learn to live with the people we love, and then we learn to live without them.

Transitions, uncertainty, beginnings and endings ... This is life. There's no question of avoiding these transitions— that's not possible. The question is, how do we live in the midst of them? *That's* the question this story tries to answer.

The transfiguration story is so full of light, it's tempting to think that the *light* is the answer. It's tempting to think that, if we could just have a mountaintop experience like Peter did, all this transition, all these changes and uncertainty would go away ... If only we could just catch a glimpse of the divine; if only we could just see a sign showing us where to go and what to do. We've all wished for that, in one form or another – some blazing light from above that will make sense out of all the ambiguity and confusion.

And light *does* offer a kind of comfort ... But the story also tells us to be *careful* about the light. Peter saw the light, and he immediately became bewildered ... *blinded* by the light, so to speak. He proposed building three dwellings, one for Jesus and one for Moses and one for Elijah. Of course, this didn't make any sense, and Luke even tells us Peter didn't know *what* he was saying because he was afraid. Peter wanted to bottle up the light, to settle down on the mountaintop, to never have to go back down to the valley – where there's so much uncertainty, so many endings and beginnings.

That's a temptation for many people, to look for a "great escape" from life. To think that if we just cling ever more tightly to this experience, or this doctrine or dogma, or this conspiracy theory, or this leader, that that will somehow make sense of everything and protect us from the uncertainty of life.

But in our story today, the voice from the cloud points to another possibility. "This is my Son, my Chosen," the voice said. "Listen to him."

*Listen to him.*

Don't get caught up in signs and wonders. Don't spend your life chasing light and glory. Don't let your eyes play tricks on you. *Listen.*

Listening – really listening – is a problem for folks throughout the gospels. *No one* wants to *listen* to Jesus! Actually, this has been a problem throughout the history of the church. People talk on and on *about* Jesus and want to split all sorts of theological hairs over who, and what, he was, whether we should follow this or that school of thought or this or that doctrine. Just in its first few centuries, the church had its schools of Alexandria and Antioch ... folks vigorously debated whether we should be Arians, or Docetists, or Ebionites, or Adoptionists, or Apollonarians, or Nestorians, or Monophysites.

I'm truly not making any of this up! It sort of makes our multitudes of denominations today look mild. For centuries, people have spilt ink – and blood – chasing these theological hobgoblins around. We want to chase the light and the comfort that comes with it. But few of us want to listen to Jesus. And there's a good reason for that.

You can see light from far away. If you lit a single candle and put it in a desert in the dark of night, you could see the candle's glow for miles. You can see light from a safe distance, without having to risk getting burned. But to *listen*, you've got to get close, you've got to risk getting involved, you've got to risk unsettling your life.

Amidst the theological cacophony and confessional babble, amidst all the shrill and piercing voices of our day, telling us who's right and who's wrong, who's in and who's out, waving banners and shouting, in Jesus' name, things that betray Jesus' way. Amidst *all* of that noise – we are called to be still, and to listen.

And what *do* we hear? I think this story of the transfiguration invites us into a simple answer to that question, to a simple truth. When we finally manage to shut out all the other voices and really listen, what do we hear? I think it comes down to this: *Follow me.*

Don't get lost in the light. Don't get blinded by the light. Don't get tangled up in what you do or don't believe, in this or that theology or set of pious magic words. Just *follow*. Love without limit. Seek and practice justice, love kindness, and walk humbly before God.

This is not an easy thing to hear, because following the way of Jesus, the way of love and compassion and justice and peace, is hard. It can be costly. It's far safer to stay up on the mountaintop.

You all know the name of Albert Schweitzer, known to most of us as the great doctor and medical missionary to Africa. But before all that, he was a renowned organist and theologian. That was his life when he made the startling decision to leave the mountaintop (or the ivory tower) behind, to go to Africa. He had become disillusioned with the church. But he couldn't quite give up on the man from Nazareth, for whom he felt a deep admiration, and from whom he felt a deep summons.

And after many years of listening and trusting and following, he wrote these timeless words:

*He comes to us as one unknown. He speaks the same word to us: 'Follow me' and sets us to the tasks which he has to fulfill in our time. He commands. And to those who obey him, whether they be wise or simple, he will reveal himself in the toils, the conflicts, the sufferings which they shall pass through in his fellowship. And, as an ineffable mystery, they shall learn in their own experience who he is.*

In the midst of all the tumult and strife, all the transitions in our lives and in our world, even now, we are called to *listen*, and we are called to *follow*. And when we do, we will discover – through all the beginnings and endings of our lives, through the light and the darkness and the noise and the silence – we will discover, as an ineffable mystery, that the true Light of the world shines in us as well – to the glory of God! Amen.