

**Last Sunday after Epiphany**  
**Feb. 19, 2023**

**Sermon by Deacon Steve Seibert**

**He was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became dazzling white.** Beloved, you might know that Leila and I returned from Israel recently. There are two likely mountains where this event took place, Mount Tabor or Mount Hermon. Our pilgrimage took us to Mt. Tabor. Our bus could only go so far, and we transferred to vans that could navigate the winding roads that included many switchbacks. The driver stopped so we could view the valley from our elevation. While we were not spectacularly high, the view looking out and down was impressive – and beautiful. You could sense that you were removed from the land below. We went through the gate to the church and monastery, parked and walked on a driveway towards a guest house and church. As it is with many places in Israel, there are churches built over or near sacred places.

I am going to pause and give you a bit of an outline of where I am taking you this morning. First, we'll look some more at this gospel passage and how we might look at Lent through its lens. Then we'll contrast light and darkness. Our guide for that middle portion is Barbara Brown Taylor, Episcopal priest, college professor and author. The ideas come from her book ***Learning to Walk in the Dark***. Finally, led by Malcolm Guite, Anglican priest, poet, singer-songwriter and academic, we will revisit the gospel. With his pipe and beard, Guite looks as though he might have stepped out of Tolkien's Middle Earth. Now, back to the Mount of Transfiguration...

No bus or van, you have walked with Jesus to the top of Mount Tabor, one of only three who Jesus asked to make the hike. Perhaps you have spent the night, talking and praying with Jesus. Peter (with whom I can identify) has less than a week ago has been reprimanded by Jesus when Peter says Jesus being put to death must not happen. **"Get behind me Satan...you are thinking not as God thinks but as humans do."** But that is in the past. As the three of you are with Jesus, Jesus is transfigured. His face shines like the sun. Can you imagine that? You are with Jesus and suddenly, he changes in a way that is truly unfathomable. As if that isn't overwhelming, now you see two men in conversation with Jesus. Somehow, you realize that it is Moses and Elijah, talking with Jesus! You have seen Jesus perform some amazing miracles but nothing could have prepared you for this. What should you do? Stare with your jaw dropped? Peter offers to build a tent, a tabernacle for each: Jesus, Moses and Elijah. Before Jesus can respond, a bright cloud covers all of you and a voice says, **"This is my Son, the Beloved: with him I am well pleased; listen to him!"** Holy smoke! In no time, you know that voice is not the voice of Jesus, Moses or Elijah. It can only be...You fall to the ground, terrified, in awe, your eyes closed. You are in the presence of God. **You might die...**

Has it been ten seconds or ten minutes? For you, it has felt like an eternity. But what is this? You know that touch, so strong yet so gentle. **"Get up and do not be afraid."** It is Jesus. You hear him say those words, and very slowly, you begin to open your eyes and raise your head.

The cloud is gone. Moses and Elijah are gone too. Everything seems normal as you see the other two disciples. You all stand up, but you know that your eyes are just big as the others. You slowly return to a more relaxed state as Jesus continues to reassure you. Everything is the same. Yet, in your deepest core you know, nothing is the same. Now everything will always be different.

As a good Jew, you know the significance of Moses, through whom God gave the law to Israel. Elijah is the greatest of all the prophets. You remember Jesus saying, **“Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets: I have come not to abolish but to fulfill.”** So, that is some of what you have just witnessed. As you walk back down with Jesus, he tells you to speak to no one about this until after he has been raised from the dead. You are not quite sure about that, but you will hold this event to yourself for the time being. You and your fellow disciples make eye contact with one another. You see the questions in their eyes, too.

Not long after this event, Jesus will “set his face towards Jerusalem”, knowing that he is moving towards his crucifixion and death. For us, it is very apropos that we hear this gospel passage on the cusp of Lent. On this Wednesday, Ash Wednesday, we will be marked with ashes as a sign of our mortality and invited to the observance of a holy Lent, by self-examination and repentance; by prayer, fasting and self-denial; and by reading and meditating on God’s holy Word. A time to look inward, into our hearts and our souls. I have heard a sermon saying we are given the bright light of both the Transfiguration and the Resurrection as the bookends of Lent, which is a time of darkness through which we must pass. In so many ways that is true. Traveling with Jesus during this time can deepen our relationship with him. This is, after all, the reason that God became man. Immanuel. But not only God with us but God in the person of Jesus, dying for us.

(KAW-kuh-suhs)

In the Loreena McKennitt song Night Ride Across the Caucasus, there is a line **Find the answers, ask the questions**. My purpose for the rest of time with you is kind of that. I suspect I may even leave you with more questions than answers. Here we go.

Lent comes from the middle English word, *lente*, meaning springtime. Barbara Brown Taylor, and here I must say that you can assume all of what I say on this should include a citation crediting her, thinks that dark and darkness have gotten short shrift in Christianity. If God is light, and there is no darkness in him, then darkness is something to be avoided, if not feared. She speaks of “full solar spirituality”, staying in the light of God around the clock, both absorbing and reflecting the sunny side of faith. She is not critical of it, she simply feels her gift is a lunar spirituality, which waxes and wanes with the season. The sun looks the same every day; the moon changes. Could her faith in God allow her to walk in the dark and learn from that? Step 1 of learning to walk in the dark is to give up running the show. That’s a big hurdle for me and should make it clear to you that I am not your director of the dark standing up here. I am your fellow pilgrim, just as uncertain or nervous as you may be, maybe more so.

But, she says, when light fades and darkness falls, God does not turn the world over to some other deity. Here is the testimony of faith: darkness is not dark to God; the night is as bright as the day.

Taylor writes that when she first started telling people that she was studying darkness, their reactions all came from the same direction:

“That makes the hair stand up on the back of my neck.”

“Is it about spiritual warfare?”

“Darkness as in evil or darkness as in depression?”

Where do we all get this fear of the dark, she wonders? When children come to visit her and her husband on their north Georgia farm, she tries to give them opportunities to get used to the dark. Teaching them they don't have to fear the dark.

One of the absolute best activities at the farm, she writes, is moving young chickens from one pen to another after dark. **This can be done in the daytime, but it is not pretty. If you try to catch wide awake chickens in the pen, they will scream and fling themselves against the chicken wire like they have heard all the stories about people wringing their necks and eating them for supper. They crash into each other. They lose their feathers. They threaten to die right there in front of you. Go into the chicken house at night, however, and it is like they have had two martinis. They chuckle to each other when you come through the door, shifting around on their perches and turning their heads to one side so they can get a better look at you.** Taylor led a young girl, Anna, through the dark to the hen house, only to realize that Anna was not with her anymore. She found Anna by following her sobs, to the place where Anna had stopped, immobilized by fear. Is that you or me when we get in the dark, both literally or mentally? Are we missing out on something good because we are afraid? And, what is it we are afraid of in the dark?

We each have a personal history of darkness that is unique to us. Beds, however, are something we all have in common. What is it about a bed at night, Taylor asks? During the daytime they seem harmless enough. You can take a nap on a Saturday afternoon without waking up wondering how much longer you have to live. You can work a crossword puzzle without worrying about who will take care of you when you live past all sense and usefulness. But wake up in bed in the middle of the night, unable to go back to sleep, and you can be in for a real workout. Your mind and your imagination just take off.

A friend of Taylor's says he turns over and over until he has all the bedclothes wrapped around him like a bandage. One night his wife tried to get some of the covers back, yanking at them and telling him to go back to sleep. “I can't,” he whispered. “I think it's God that's bothering me.”

“Well, God's not bothering me,” she said, “so get up and pray, but do it somewhere else.”

That is probably the best idea, but if the prayer is a plea to be returned to unconsciousness, then it's just another evasion. What if I could learn to trust my feelings instead of asking to be delivered from them? What if I could follow one of my great fears all the way to the edge of the

abyss, take a breath, and keep going? Isn't there a chance of being surprised by what happens next? Better yet, what if I could learn how to stay in the present instead of letting my anxieties run on fast forward? Are we willing to listen when we cannot see clearly, when we are in a cloud of unknowing?

Make no mistake, there is darkness out there that should be avoided, darkness that is evil. But, there are lights that draw us away from God. The glitter of the love of money, success at all costs, or power over people. We should also not mistake depression for a darkness of unknowing. As one who has dealt with moderate depression at times, I tell you that is the time to seek professional help. But if our darkness is not evil and not depression, are we willing to stay with it? To give up knowing all the answers, give up control, or perhaps to ask the questions when we have found the answers. God's promise to Abraham came not in the bright sun of day, but at night, when God showed him at night that his descendants would be as numerous as the stars. Stars that are not visible in the light of day. This Lent, this springtime, has potential for new growth and a deepening of our faith, both through our Lenten disciplines and our willingness to stay with our discomfort and uncertainty. Our darkness. May we trust God to lead us when we don't have all the answers.

Malcolm Guite notes an additional significance of Moses and Elijah being present with Jesus. Yes, they represent the law and the prophets. But each also had direct encounters with God on Mount Sinai. Moses met God not in the light of day but on Mount Sinai when it was entirely wrapped in smoke. When Moses returned to the Israelites after meeting with God, he wore a veil over his face to hide the glowing of his face. And yet, he had not met God in bright light but in smoke and darkness.

Let us once again imagine the transfiguration of Jesus. Guite notes that this transfiguration is not a vision; rather, this is the same Jesus the disciples have walked with, eaten with. They have seen him sweat. No this is not a vision. For a space in time, the disciples have seen Jesus as he truly is, no longer veiled by our human limitations, our fallen nature. The transfiguration is not Jesus changed, but Jesus revealed. Again, the transfiguration is Jesus revealed.

So what about this piece of wood? There was an old monk, I'm guessing about 75 years old, trimming trees at Mt. Tabor. He was 12-15' up in the tree, using a chain saw. As we were leaving, I thought I would like to have a piece of wood from that holy place. I wasn't sure if he would give me any. When I asked, I was told yes and pointed to a pile of cut wood about 4' high to choose what I wanted. I guess that monk didn't consider that cut wood very sacred. But as I thought about this yesterday, it occurred to me that this was the perfect metaphor. In every way to the eye, this is simply a piece of wood, cut by a chain saw that wasn't very sharp. For me, however, it's more than that. It is a signpost pointing to this transfiguration of Jesus. For me, this will never be simply a piece of wood.

Guite states that we all experience such moments in our lives, brief moments of transfiguration. The world calls those moments an illusion. But are they? These moments are often seeing beyond the physical. Seeing God's grace in a flower. Guite says when that happens, we are

seeing the world as it really is. When we have these moments, we cannot sustain them, but we should remember them, holding them in our hearts. Always.

**Amen.**