

February 11, 2024 – Exodus 34:29-35, 2 Corinthians 3:12-4:6, Mark 9:2-9

When Christians use Biblical terms like “the light of Christ” or “the light of the world” or “walking as a child of the light” we're generally using the terms metaphorically or spiritually. Christ is our metaphorical light. He shows the way to the Father. He reveals evil. He helps us see the truth of God's love and salvation. The light he gives is a spiritual light seen by spiritual eyes in a spiritually dark world.

But today that all changes. On the Feast of the Transfiguration, the light of Christ is no longer just metaphorical light. It is no longer just spiritual light. It is real, literal light. Light that is brighter than the sun. Light that the disciples see and it overwhelms them. Terrifies them with it's brightness. Because it is the light of God himself.

The last Sunday of this season of Epiphany is always Transfiguration Sunday in the three year lectionary for good reason. In this season in which we see God's Son revealed to the world, there is almost no fuller revelation of God's incarnation than the light that shined from the face of Jesus on that mountaintop. It is second only to the resurrection itself.

St Peter says as much in his second letter. Out of all of the things that Peter could point to in Jesus' ministry that confirm in Peter's mind that Jesus really was the Son of God, it is the Transfiguration that apparently convinces him the most. Seeing Jesus' glory and majesty, hearing the voice of the Father, witnessing this amazing spectacle... this was the moment when Peter knew that Jesus was the Lord. The God of Israel made flesh and blood.

For Peter, that literal, physical light revealed to him many metaphorical, spiritual things about Jesus. Which is good, because that why Jesus did it. That's why he invited Peter onto that mountain. He wanted Peter to see and recognize his divinity.

This was supposed to be a light that revealed things to Peter and James and John. So that Peter, James, and John could then reveal things to us. So that we could receive their testimony about Jesus as a prophetic word. Giving us the light of Christ. That was the whole point.

But there's a funny thing about light. It doesn't always reveal things, does it? Sometimes light can actually obscure things, oddly enough.

My wife knows all about that. You see my wife hates driving at night. When we go on a long road trip, she will gladly take her turn in the daylight hours. Driving for as long as I need her to. But when the sun goes down, she's done.

Why? Because she's blind. The glare of oncoming headlights and streetlights and road signs... it all just becomes too much. Her eyes are just too sensitive.

I know she's not alone. I suspect there are a fair number of you who feel exactly the same way. I do too, occasionally. Some of those newer LED headlights are just painful to look at. The digital billboards and signs horribly distracting. Light in the darkness can be a very good thing. Until it blinds you.

That's what happened to the Israelites in our Old Testament lesson. The Israelites are camped around the base of Mount Sinai. Moses has already gone up onto the mountain once, where he received the Ten Commandments and a great many other laws and instructions. He comes back down and immediately discovers that the people have descended into idolatry and debauchery while he was gone, worshipping a golden calf and engaging in all sorts of immorality.

He's furious and frustrated. He breaks the Ten Commandments in his anger, punishes the people, and goes back up onto the mountain for a second meeting with God. And near the end of this second encounter with God, he makes a surprising request: he wants to see God's face.

God tells him that's not going to happen. To see God's face would kill a sinful man like Moses. But God will give him something. He tells Moses to go into a cleft in the rock, where he will place his hand over top of him and let Moses see a glimpse of His goodness and glory as he passes by.

Just that glimpse is enough to transfigure Moses' face. He comes down from the mountain radiant with God's light. And from the sounds of it, he looks a bit like Jesus in his own transfiguration. Not shining with his own light, obviously. But reflecting the light of the Lord.

You would think that the Israelites would be amazed by this revelation of God's light. Drawn to the glory God shines through Moses. But they're not. They're blinded by it. And they're terrified of him. They beg Moses to put a veil over his face so that they don't have to see this painfully bright light.

It makes me wonder whether that's what Peter was asking as well. The disciples were similarly terrified of Jesus when he was transfigured. And Peter asks him whether they can build three tents for Jesus, Moses, and Elijah. Why was that? The text doesn't say. But I wonder if it's because they were similarly blinded by this intense light and wanted a way to veil God's glory like the Israelites did.

Regardless, Moses goes along with their request. He puts on a veil. And he only takes it off when he's delivering a prophetic word from the Lord for the Israelites. For those times when he's speaking God's Law to them, he makes them endure God's glory. But the rest of the time, he keeps it hidden.

And what St Paul tells us is that the Jews of Jesus' day were not that much different than the Israelites of Moses' day. You see, the light of God shines through every page of Scripture. But without Christ, that glory is simply blinding. It's terrifying. Because to read God's Law without a savior is to read about your own condemnation and nothing more.

The Ten Commandments are not ten suggestions. They are binding laws that must be obeyed. And the consequence of not following them is eternal death and hell. That's scary. That's blinding. For a sinful human being, accustomed to the darkness, the last thing you want to do is stare into a God whose light is that bright.

And so the Jews veiled it. In fact, every unbeliever veils it. Occasionally, even Christians try to veil it. We at God's law and say, "Well, I'm good enough, aren't I? My sins aren't that big. I'm pretty decent. God can't be that angry with me. He wouldn't really send me to hell, would he?" Like the Israelites putting a veil over Moses' face so that he could be a little more bearable and a little less terrifying, sinful human beings put a veil over God's Law to make it a little more bearable and little less terrifying.

But we shouldn't. And we don't need to. Because those bright LED headlights that blind you at night aren't so blinding during the day, are they? Those digital billboards that annoy you while you're driving aren't so annoying when the sun is out. And God's Law isn't so terrifying when it's read surrounded by the light of Jesus Christ.

That's what Paul tells us. Only by the light of Christ can the veil be lifted from our eyes. Only then can we read about the judgement and wrath of God and know that it's not there to blind us. It's not there to hurt us. It's not there to terrify us. It's there to show us our desperate need for a savior.

With Christ, the veil is lifted. And we see the image of God. Moses wanted to see the face of God on Mount Sinai. But God wouldn't show it to him then. No, Moses had to wait until the mountain of the Transfiguration to see God's face. For he looked into the face of God in Jesus Christ. And there, once again, he saw all of God's goodness.

We see all of God's goodness in Jesus Christ. For we see the God who would become man, die, and rise again that we may know the good news of his salvation. We see the image of God, in all his Law and all his Gospel. The God who condemns sin and the God who saves sinners.

And the God who transforms us, like Moses was transformed. So that we shine that same image of God. Not with a blinding light that terrifies the world, but with God's goodness reflected in everything we do. So that by the work of the Spirit we are set free for ministry by the mercy of God.

For we are indeed children of the light. The metaphorical, spiritual light of Christ. And the literal, physical light of the glory of God that shone on that mountaintop. Light that transformed simple fishermen into Apostles. Light that transforms you and me into disciples of Jesus Christ. Amen.