

How the Light Beam Works

Exodus 34: 29-34

Luke 9: 28-36

The Bible is loaded with images of light:

In Genesis, the light of creation: *In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters. Then God said, “Let there be light”; and there was light. Then God saw that the light was good; and God separated the light from the darkness.*

In an Advent passage we read from the prophet Isaiah, the light of salvation for Israel and for all peoples: *The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness – on them has light shined.*

In the Gospel of John, the light that is Jesus Christ: *Again Jesus spoke to them, saying, “I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life.”*

This morning, which is called Transfiguration Sunday, we have yet another image of light; it is the same light as in all those other passages. I would call it the light of holiness.

‘Transfiguration’ refers to the change that occurs in Jesus, right before the eyes of Peter, James and John, when this holy light suddenly comes. *While [Jesus] 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...Peter and his*

companions saw [Jesus'] glory. No, we don't hear the actual word 'light', but there is a light here like no other. Dazzling, luminous, glorious holy light.

You will have noticed, I'm sure, how much this transfiguration scene resembles the passage from Exodus that Jim read earlier. The appearance of Moses' face changed also. *As [Moses] came down from the mountain with the two tablets of the covenant in his hand, [he] did not know that the skin of his face shone because he had been talking with God.* And whenever Moses went to speak with God, he would come out with that shining face.

So here, in our readings for today, is another image of light. When we encounter God, when we experience the Holy Spirit, a shining, glorious, holy light comes out from within us. *Whoever follows me, said Jesus, will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life.* **The light of God's glory transfigures the human being into a holy being.**

Let me ask you now to imagine another image of light – light as a beam. Picture, as we did with the children, a sunbeam or the strong beam from a lighthouse.

C. S. Lewis uses this image to describe how a person comes to understand Christianity. (Willimon 29) In an essay entitled, "Meditation in a Dark Toolshed," Lewis tells of finding himself in a dark toolshed, with a beam of light streaming through a small crack in the roof. He noted that when he looked at the beam of light, he saw one thing, but when he changed his position to enter into the beam of light and look along it or with it, he saw something quite different. When he was no longer looking at the beam of light, he saw not the beam, but that which was affected by the beam. He saw what was illuminated.

For Lewis, this example becomes a metaphor for two different ways of knowing – observational, from the outside, and participative, from the inside.

The observational way is a more objective, scientific way of knowing a reality. **Regarding Christianity, we might know it by “looking at” what Christians do and say.** We might know this church, for example, by where the Pancake breakfast is or where the moms meet on Wednesday morning or AA on Tuesday night. We might, like the people of Israel, know that Moses had been speaking with God because of the way his face shone. Or like Peter, James and John, we might know the identity of Jesus because of what they saw and heard – the change in his appearance, his dazzling white clothing, the presence of Moses and Elijah, the words from heaven, “This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!” As Lewis notes, such observation undoubtedly tells us much about the phenomena that we are looking at, but it doesn’t tell us everything.

It is not the only way of knowing something.

The other way of knowing, according to Lewis, is from the inside. **This would be like looking along the beam of light to see what it shows.** Again regarding Christianity, we might know more about it by looking at the world with the eyes of Jesus or by asking ourselves in some given situation, “What would Jesus do?” This is what the voice from heaven is saying here in Luke: “*This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!*” This is what Jesus was trying to teach his disciples so that *whoever follows [him] will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life.* If you would know what being a Christian is, enter into the life of the church. Come serve at the soup kitchen, cook for SHIP. Come to Bible study, to the prayer luncheon. Come to worship, sing and listen. Come...

There is a corollary to Lewis's entering the beam and looking along with it and that is to **stand in the beam of light and have it pass through you so that you shine with its light. As happened with Moses and with Jesus, the light of God's glory can transfigure the human being into a holy being.**

This happens in the church too. And it happens in this church. The children in one of our church families attend a Catholic school where they learn about Christianity as part of their curriculum. But as their mother recently wrote, at school they learn about Christian character and how to treat others as Jesus treated people; at Peapack Reformed, they see these lessons lived out. At school, they learn to think of others in need; at Peapack Reformed, they serve breakfast to buy chicks to send to Africa. At school they read the Christmas story and draw angels; at Peapack Reformed, they become shepherds and angels.

God is at work here. Within each of us – from the youngest child to the oldest adult - there does indeed exist the possibility that a beam of holy light will come shining through. How awesome is that!

The Bible is indeed loaded with images of light. And every day life is loaded with those images too, with possibilities for God's light to shine in the world through us; for us to be transfigured from human beings to holy beings.

Yet some words of caution need to be said. First, we can't let this idea go to our heads. We cannot pridefully presume that the beam of holy light always shines through us. Sometimes it doesn't. Peter, you'll recall, wanted to keep that transcendent moment with Jesus, Moses and Elijah; he

wanted to build places for them all to stay right there, shining gloriously forever. Wasn't going to happen.

Peter was interrupted by the cloud – the cloud of God's voice. *While Peter was saying this, a cloud came and overshadowed them.* This brings me to the second caution: where there is light there is also shadow and darkness. Remember the title of C.S. Lewis's essay – "Meditation in a Dark Toolshed." The beam of light can only be seen because of the darkness which it pierces.

Brother Ramon, a Franciscan monk, tells a story about transfiguring light in Roslin Chapel, near Edinburgh, Scotland. (which chapel figures prominently in the recently popular book and movie, *The DaVinci Code*) Visualize these images of light in a different kind of dark toolshed.

Before I joined the Franciscans, I lived for a year with the Community of the Transfiguration in Roslin...At that time the community had charge of the Sunday eucharist in the famous and mysterious Roslin Chapel. I say 'mysterious' because I felt some strange influences there – a place where light and darkness seemed in conflict. There were some dark stories about the Battle of Roslin and the bloodshed which was carried into the church of that time, and down into the crypt.

It was the crypt which was most solemn in its light and darkness. You became aware of the descent below ground level, and if there was not heat it was both dark and damp. But as you descended, you were faced with a glorious window, the base of which was at ground level, while you further descended into the crypt. It depicted the wonderful light and colour of the transfiguration, the effulgent Christ radiating rays of glory towards the dazed disciples, while underneath were the words: 'In your light shall we see light.' I felt a creepy sense of historical darkness in that crypt, but also a theological and spiritual sense of glory.

Our text [for today] is like that. It is a place of dazzling glory, but also of impending darkness, for here it is that Jesus sets his face

and heart toward the cross. Here it is that law and prophet...appear in glory, and speak with [Jesus] about his exodus, the passion which he was to accomplish in Jerusalem.(Ward 86-7)

The Bible is indeed loaded with images of light. And everyday life, throughout history, in places all over the world, has been and is loaded, too, with images of God's light breaking in, beaming through. What a blessing it is for that light to shine upon us and through us.

To God be the glory, forever and ever. Amen.

Ward, Hannah and Jennifer Wild, comp., *Resources for Preaching and Worship, Year C*.
Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2003
Willimon, William H. "They Saw His Glory." *Pulpit Resource* 35.1(2007) 29-32.

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