

Living in the Light

Today is the Last Sunday after the Epiphany, the conclusion of our season of Gospels and stories and prayers about the manifestation of Christ in mission and ministry in the world. We always begin and end the Epiphany season with *light*. On Epiphany Day, January 6, we remember how the Wise Men were led to Jesus by the light of a star. And today, the last Sunday of Epiphanytide, we remember how Jesus himself shone with heavenly light, how Peter and James and John were led to deeper knowledge of Jesus by light, not from a star, but light shining from Jesus himself. In fact, all our readings today talk about light. And, if we take them all together, they show a kind of progression in the light, a transformation in *where the light is coming from*—even an invitation to look for the light in our own lives.

Our first reading today tells the story of how the prophet Elijah was taken up into heaven, how Elijah the master and Elisha the apprentice were separated, and how Elisha became prophet in his own right. As the two men journey along together, Elijah knows he's about to be taken up, and he wants to spare Elisha the pain of separation, so he keeps telling Elisha to stay behind as he goes on ahead. But Elisha refuses to leave him, calling God's life and Elijah's own life to witness that he will not stay behind. And because of that faithfulness, because of Elisha's unshakeable fidelity to the prophetic call, Elisha is allowed to see Elijah's departure, Elisha sees the light of God shine forth as fire, fire from heaven, fire that comes from above and beyond anything they have ever known before, fire that takes the form of horses and chariots and a whirlwind that carries Elijah bodily into heaven. For Elijah and Elisha the light of God shines forth from creation, from a world of phenomena that is bigger and stronger and stranger than they can comprehend. For Elijah and Elisha the light of God shines forth as power from outside themselves that can transform their lives.

The light of God shines forth in a different way in our Gospel reading today. Jesus takes Peter and James and John to a high mountain, apart from the crowds and the controversies and even the other disciples, and Jesus calls them to pray together. And while they are praying they see Jesus transfigured; they see the light of heaven shining from his face and his hands and even his clothes; they see the light of God in a bright cloud—not so different from the bright clouds Elijah and Elisha saw—and realize it is that *very same light* shining in their master and their teacher and their friend. What Elijah and Elisha experienced as the light of God coming from outside themselves, from above and beyond and transcendent over them, Peter and James and John experience as the light of God coming from Jesus, the light of God coming from the one who shares their human life and fills it with the life of divinity. For Peter and James and John the light of God shines forth as power in Jesus, power incarnate beside them in their humanity, that can transform their lives.

And finally, in our Epistle reading, we see the light of God shining forth in a third way, a third place from which the light is made manifest for the world. Paul writes to the Corinthians: "For it is the God who said, 'Let light shine out of darkness,' who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ." The light, Paul says, shines now in the gospel—and by "gospel" Paul means more than just the written documents, because of course in Paul's time the documents we know as gospels hadn't yet been written. Instead, for Paul "gospel" means the Good News as it is *heard* and *accepted* and *believed* and *lived*—Good News as it is *embodied*—in the real lives of real people in the real world. For Paul, "gospel" means a *way to live* in response to Jesus. And the reason we can live that way in response to Jesus, Paul says, is because God has poured the light into our hearts, because God has caused the light to shine *in us*. The light of God that shone out at the very moment of creation—the light of God that shone in chariots of fire for Elijah and Elisha—the light of God that shone in the transfiguration of Jesus—that same light shines now in us, enlightening us with the knowledge of the glory of God in Jesus, empowering us to proclaim Jesus Christ as Lord and ourselves as servant ministers by living Christlike lives. For we who believe the gospel, the light of God shines forth as power in us, empowerment within our hearts, that can transform our lives.

So if we take these three readings together, they show us the light of God as something transcendent beyond us, and something incarnate along with us, and something immanent within us. Taken together, these readings invite us to see the light of God shining in all kinds of places, in all manner of times, in all sorts of ways.

We are invited to see the light of God shining in creation, shining in the world of nature, in fire and wind and sky and sea and earth, in the mountains and the valleys and the rivers, in the farms and the forests and in our own churchyard. One summer I was vacationing in Northern Michigan, on the shores of Lake Superior, and late one afternoon we had a huge thunderstorm—big waves coming in off the lake, wind whipping up the rocks and the pine trees, lightning like fire lighting up the sky from one end to the other. It was awe-inspiring, in the old-fashioned, kind of scary meaning of the word. And when the worst of the storm had passed and we were unafraid to go outside again, there was a formation of clouds left in the sky that looked like two huge wings, spread out over the town and the harbor and the lake and the hills. And it reminded me that in the First Testament God is often depicted as coming in the thunderstorm, with wind and lightning and terrifying power—and yet God is also depicted as riding in the clouds to protect God’s people, hiding us under the shadow of God’s wings. Those clouds-shaped-like-wings shone in the thundery sky like a reminder for me of God’s transcendent and yet protective love. We are invited to see the light of God shining in creation.

And we are invited to see the light of God shining in the face of Jesus, and therefore, by extension, in the faces of all people everywhere. In our Baptismal Covenant we promise to seek and serve Christ in all persons, and that means we promise to look for the same light that shone in Jesus to shine in the faces of our neighbors, our families, our closest dearest loved ones—and also in the faces of strangers, the poor, the outcast, the marginalized, the homeless, the jobless—we promise to see the light of God shining in faces we all too often treat as if they were invisible. One time I saw a man standing at a busy intersection in the city, holding up a sign, the way beggars at intersections often do. Only instead of saying “Homeless, need help” or “Will work for food,” his sign said “You know you see me”—his sign was a plea for basic human recognition after spending hours and days and weeks standing there with people driving by him, ignoring him, refusing to acknowledge him, as if he were invisible. Seeing the light of Jesus in the faces of others means recognizing our shared humanity, and because we recognize each other in Christ it means serving each other in Christ, meeting each other’s needs in compassion, and working to change the conditions that cause such need in justice. We are invited to see the light of God, shining through Jesus, in each other.

And we are invited to see the light of God shining in ourselves, shining in our hearts when we have a new insight or understanding about what Jesus means for us; shining in us when we discern God’s will or God’s calling for this particular moment, this particular action, in our lives, when we discern God’s will and then do it; shining in us when we reach out in love and compassion and Christly care for those God gives us to love. I had a friend in seminary, years ago, who told about encountering Christ in a hospital room during the practice chaplaincy that was part of our seminary training. He said he had on his floor a man who’d been injured in a foundry accident and had burns over much of his body. This man was in a lot of pain, and even though the doctors prescribed a lot of pain medication it didn’t help much, because with burns it seldom does. And my friend was terrified to go and see this man: terrified because he knew he couldn’t do anything, he couldn’t say any words that would really help, he couldn’t stretch out his hands and heal the wounds, he couldn’t do a thing that would make any kind of real difference for this man. But he was the chaplain, and this was his floor, and he was his patient, and he had to go see him. So he went in, and opened his mouth—fully expecting some useless platitudes to come burbling out—and heard his own voice say “I am so sorry you’ve been hurt. Would you mind if I sat here for awhile and read some psalms with you?” And the man said “I’d like that a lot.” So he took out his Prayer Book and started with Psalm 23—it’s always good to start with Psalm 23—and for awhile they just listened together to poems of faith that God holds us up when nothing else can. And after a time the man said “Thank you. I think that was just what I needed. I think I’d like to try to sleep now.” And he closed his eyes, and his face that had been clenched in pain relaxed, and he slept. My friend said that he encountered Christ in that hospital room, Christ *within him*, Christ shining like light in his heart giving him courage to face pain and inspiration to share psalms when he knew his own words wouldn’t do. We are invited to see the light of God shining in ourselves.

So where do *you* see the light of God shining in this Good News today? Where do you witness the light of God in creation, or in each other, or in yourself? What manifestation of mystery and mission and ministry is God empowering in you right now? Because the message for us today is that the light of God is shining here, now, around us and among us and within us, shining for us to transform our lives. All we have to do is have the faith to open our eyes. Amen.