

First Congregational United Church of Christ

“Light of the World?”

Mark 9:2-9

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Epiphany, the season of light, culminates today with supernova we refer to as the transfiguration. On the mountaintop the veil is drawn back and the light and life which brought all things into being is fully revealed in Jesus. Peter, James and John are afforded the opportunity to see the truth about who Jesus is, ratifying his self-identification recorded in John’s gospel: “I am the light of the world” (John 8:12).

This was an ecstatic moment for Jesus’ entourage. They were “put out of place” or “beside themselves” which is what ecstasy means. And, while I both understand and share Peter’s discomfort with his experience and his desire to memorialize the moment, God appears less interested in our memorializing moments of spiritual awareness than in our embodying moments of spiritual awareness. So, events move very quickly from the revelation that Jesus is “the light of the world,” in this text proclaimed in the words, “This is my Son; the Beloved,” to “You are the light of the world” (Matthew 5:14), stated with the words, “Listen to him.”

You know, if Jesus could just be Jesus and we could just enjoy Jesus being Jesus, what a wonderful world this world would be. God, however, seems to have other ideas.

I suppose that we are fortunate that, for the most part, God fully reveals the divine self in video clips rather than full length feature film. Partly, because as scripture wisely attests, we couldn’t take that much God straight. It would kill us. And, truth be told, we can only experience who we are at our most elemental in measured doses. It’s not that recognizing we too “are the light of the world” is so bad, after all we even sing: “Lord, I want to be like Jesus, in my heart,” because we do and because we are. It is the doing part of being who we are that can wear you down. Peter was smart to focus on Jesus’ transfiguration and to ignore his own.

Think about it. Isn’t it both easier and far more satisfying to dislike people who are genuinely dislikeable? A jerk is a jerk. Right? And then, there is the whole business about forgiving people who have wronged you. It’s much more satisfying to wish them their comeuppance, as we used to say. And, if the wrong was damaging or intentional, why settle for justice being meted out when you could perhaps enjoy a little vengeance? And why can’t we keep what we believe is ours? Why not amass wealth and spend it on ourselves and on our loved ones? Most of us struggle with tithing ten percent never mind sacrificial giving. How is it that we are the ones who have to cast a wide net, draw a big circle, be consistently compassionate, use whatever metaphor you prefer?

I think Peter was smart. Document the moment. Build a monument, a chapel, a church, even a cathedral. Contain the revelation. Visit the shrine and worship every now and again. Yes. And, let Jesus be Jesus, all light and goodness, so we can go about our lives undisturbed.

Not being who you are is also deadly. That’s one way to read the Adam and Eve account in Genesis. Created from the dust of the earth by the loving hands of God and given life by the divine breath - created in the image of God, no less - and pronounced “very good” by the Holy One, humanity decides to deny its God-given identity and the outcome was a miserable life and a meaningless, unnecessary death. Read Genesis Chapter three when you get home. That said, our most viable choices seem to be around how we will live our God-given identity. How will we, each one of us and all of us together, find ways to be “the light of the world” that are honest to God and authentic to us? How are we going to shine some of Christ’s light in the darkness around us?

Just to continue riffing on some of the challenges I’ve already raised, placed before us in scripture, there are some fairly obvious faith practices we already engage in and which we might want to consider exploring more fully.

- Extend an extravagant welcome to all people. Cast a wide net. Leave no one out. Just because you don't like someone or consider them "unclean," to reference last week's text, doesn't mean God doesn't seek that person's well being. "Wherever you are in your spiritual journey, you are welcome at First," we say. We say so and we continue to discover more about what this means and to live into its meaning.
- Hold onto less and give more. This is very counter-cultural. We are supposed to save for college tuition, for retirement, for future spending... . But, to intentionally structure your budget to ensure tithing ten percent of your household income, never mind sacrificial giving to see to the well-being of others through the church... that remains a challenge. That certainly not how my financial advisor counsels me. But, I'll never forget Derek's stewardship moment last year in describing budgeting in the Olson household - "Save more in order to give more."
- Seek justice, not vengeance. You know, the whole "eye for an eye" thing found in Deuteronomy was, at one point in time, progressive legislation. It was intended to limit violence between individuals, households and tribes by allowing only the same loss to come to the offending party. And, it was not required. The apostle Paul was both clear and smart in quoting another portion of Deuteronomy encouraging us to let vengeance be God's affair.
- Related to justice, sometimes referred to as love institutionalized, there is forgiveness. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa did a remarkable job with this. The Commission provided a context which allowed victims and those who victimized to bring their past out into the open with the hope of finding a way forward together. Forgiveness, not forgetting, is the key to justice here.
- Now, as to the person who is designed by both nature and nurture to be unlikeable, we have to remember their creation in the image of God. It's in there somewhere. It's in there somewhere, just as it is in you and in me. I'm sure there are days when even God has to work hard to remember we are created in the Divine image. For instance, near the conclusion of the flood narrative, with Noah and his family and the menagerie all off the ark, Noah offered a burnt offering to God, who was pleased, we are told, and, who said, "I will never again curse the ground because of human kind, for the inclination of the human heart is evil from youth..." (Genesis 8:21). God knows that God's future with humanity is not going to be one bit better than it had been in the past which God had just flushed. Still, "God blessed Noah and his" family (Genesis 9:1), reaffirming that human kind is made in the Divine image (Genesis 9:6). It had to have been out of this deep spiritual well that Jesus found the courage to say, "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you" (Matthew 5:44). And, this is how the apostle Paul could teach, as we are often reminded in our benediction, "Return to no one evil for evil but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all" (Romans 12:17).

Peter, James and John recognized the luminous Jesus through whom the light of God

shone brightly and they heard God's voice: "This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him" (Mark 9:7). In that moment of ecstasy they experienced God-with-us in Jesus. Would they allow themselves to be transfigured, to become "the light of the world"? With Christ as work in us, will we?

Let us pray, in the words of St. Francis:

Lord, make us instruments of your peace.

Where there is hatred, let us sow love.

Where there is injury, pardon.

Where there is doubt, faith.

Where there is despair, hope.

Where there is darkness, light.

Where there is sadness, joy.

O Divine Master,

grant that we may not so much seek to be consoled, as to console;

to be understood, as to understand;

to be loved, as to love.

For it is in giving that we receive.

It is in pardoning that we are pardoned,

and it is in dying that we are born to Eternal Life.