

‘Til the Morning Star Rises

Mark 9:2-9

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May my words be a lamp to our feet, and a light to our path.

Have you noticed how many images of light and darkness we use in our worship: in Scripture, in prayers, and in hymns? During Advent, as we await the coming of Jesus, we light candles to chase away the early darkness. These last eight weeks—from Christmas and Epiphany, then through the six Sundays after Epiphany—we have savored the images of Jesus as the light of the world, and the Magi following the star to the stable. Today Jesus takes the notion of “light” to a whole new level when he leads his closest friends—Peter, James, and John—away from the crowd for some quiet and prayer. They have been on the road for weeks, hearing Jesus preach the word of God to large crowds everywhere they go. They have stood in awe as Jesus cast out demons and fed the five thousand, as he preached using parables that they had never before heard from any rabbi, as he calmed the waters of the Sea of Galilee when their boat began to sink in the choppy waves.

But they need quiet, as Jesus well knows. They need time to make sense of this man who does wonders, who speaks as no human has ever dared to do: strange, challenging commands. Six days earlier—just before today’s lesson—he has said to them, and to the crowd, that they must be willing to give their lives if they are to follow him. “Those who want to save their life will lose it,” and “it will not profit them if they gain the whole world but forfeit their souls.” How many times I heard one of my grade school teachers, good Dominican sisters all, teach us those passages. I took them to heart, but I had no clue how I was to give up my life for the sake of Jesus. I don’t doubt that the apostles were as bewildered as I was.

And so, weary with the rigors of the road, Jesus leads them up a high mountain, probably Mount Herman, near Caesarea Philippi, where they have been the last few weeks. They need quiet after the crowds and the powerful teaching of their friend. But what they get instead is a vision, Jesus transfigured, his clothing whiter than any bleach can achieve. And standing with Jesus are Moses and Elijah: Moses, the lawgiver, the traditional author of the Torah, the first five books of the Bible, which were the foundation of the Jewish religion; Elijah, the prophet who was whisked away from earth in a chariot of fire, and who was expected to appear on earth before the Messiah walked the roads of Galilee. Their rapture is broken when Peter, ever one to speak from his heart, suggests they build booths for Moses and Elijah. He has no sooner spoken when a cloud overshadows them, and from the unearthly gloom a voice booms: “This is my Son, my beloved; listen to him!”

That certainly beats anything we see on New Year’s Eve in Times Square, at halftime of the Super Bowl, or in the opening ceremony of the Olympic Games. When the four men begin to walk down the mountain, Peter, James, and John are still breathless, eager to share what they’ve seen. And what does Jesus do? He says to tell no one until after he has risen from the dead. And so they come back down into the rough and tumble world, where they are immediately swarmed by a crowd that wants to be close to Jesus, to hear his teaching, and to ask him for healing. And they keep their promise of silence, even through the terrible week in Jerusalem when Jesus rides in a king, then dies on the cross.

The author of the Second Letter of Peter, writing to gentile converts, reflects on the power of that mountaintop experience. He says “. . . we have been eyewitnesses of his majesty. For he received honor and glory from God the Father when that voice [said] ‘This is my Son, my Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.’ We ourselves heard this voice come from heaven, while we were with him on the holy mountain. You will do well to be attentive to this as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in our hearts.” (2 Peter 1)

A message, indeed, for us as well, living centuries later in a land that would have been strange to Peter, James, and John. They would have wondered at this church, more comfortable than any home they would have known. But does that message, a lifeline to the earliest Christians, who were often threatened with persecution and death for their beliefs, have anything to do with us today? I think it does, and often in ways that we don't notice.

As most of you know, my quiet ministry—almost unseen—is with the residents and staff of a small group home for adults with cognitive impairments. For more than twelve years I have led them in weekly worship, provided a listening ear to their staff, visited residents in the hospital, officiated the funerals of several residents as well as the wedding of one of their staff. Our Christmas carolers have serenaded at the house the last few years, to the delight to staff and residents alike. Once I led a small service to ask God's blessing on the new house of one of the staff.

It has been a rich time, but the last few months I have struggled with my commitment. There have been many changes in staff, resulting in poor morale and a tendency to forget it is "church" day, so that the residents are often in bed when I arrive. Two residents have died since mid-summer, a grief for staff and residents alike: months later, their rooms remain empty, a painful reminder of their absence. Some Tuesdays I wonder whether it is worth my time to lead three people in worship.

I realized this past week, as I meditated on today's readings, that I was struggling down the mountain—the spiritually energizing place where I first loved the most disabled among us. And last Tuesday, I experienced a shift, a new landscape. When I arrived that day Jim and Chris were up and ready, comfortable in their recliners. Nicole was sitting on her bed. She had declined worship the last few weeks, but when I offered her the drum, she grabbed it and shot out the door to take her place in the living room. After our usual opening song I suggested that we sing "This Little Light of Mine." Nicole grinned wickedly, because she knew what Jim

might do. And he performed as though on command, laughing heartily when I sang “Hide it under a bushel: No!” Nicole and I joined in his joyful laughter, which went on and on mouth so wide open I feared he would hurt himself.

In a small way, the words of Second Peter opened up a new path for me: “You will do well to be attentive to this as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts.” I am grateful for the reminder that my presence in that home matters in the kingdom of God, and that it matters to the residents and staff. And I am more aware that it matters to me, for we bless one another down here on this snowy plain, shining our lights in a small house, a quiet house.

Amen.