

Every year the church calendar moves us from Advent through Christmas, and then through the weeks following Epiphany, and then to the season of Lent that begins this week. And every year comes this Sunday, the Transfiguration of the Lord Sunday, just before Ash Wednesday.

Having read this passage, or ones like these from other books, year after year it would be no wonder if every Christian felt a little bit like Peter, kind of overwhelmed and dumbfounded, not knowing just what to think about these strange scriptures, and also not knowing just what to say.

In Israel the traditional site of the Transfiguration is Mount Tabor, a very tall and distinctive prominence among the other hill tops around the area. It is so tall and isolated that just about anywhere in Galilee and northern Israel it can be picked out from the rest. When I was blessed to travel there in November I took an opportunity to go with a small group of others to check out this place. We drove up to the top where there was quite a nice view and a lovely church building. Despite prayer and waiting and silence and watching, nothing was given to clear up these passages or to shed light on the meaning of these ancient stories and lessons.

Enough so that it could be that this is the point of it all. What is it Isaiah says, “Looking and looking they shall not see.” And maybe that is kind of the point of Paul in his teaching on Moses’ fading glory. Perhaps to understand the story of the Transfiguration we come to grips with the problem of what we see when we look; and we come to grips with the promise that God wants us to see something other than what we do see.

An Episcopal Priest, Adam Thomas, writes about how the idea of Jesus’ clothing becoming dazzling white and his face changing made him think of a science project he did in the eighth grade. He did not even get honorable mention for it, but he learned something doing that science project that stuck with him. He had taken a crystal prism and set up a light to shine through it to reveal the rainbow colors. And everyone loves that effect – the first time we see it as children we are amazed, and even now, when light refracts through our windows in our sanctuary or through a crystal somewhere, we usually experience a delighted wonder at that. Well, Rev. Thomas writes about how this helps us realize how we see the world. When light hits certain things in our world the light breaks and we see color. This helps us make sense and meaning of the world. Something

we may never think about is that we only see a small slice of the light that is shining. We can only see so much.

What we see is magnificent, and what we do with what we can see is magnificent. Up on the mountain Jesus breaks open the spectrum and invites his disciples to see more than what normally meets the eye. In the full beam of God's light, Jesus' face is changed and his clothing shines. In the bright light the disciples are able to see more than they have before. In the transforming power of prayer in the presence of Christ the disciples are transformed with Jesus into citizens of a broader realm.

What Paul seems to be saying is that Christ comes and he is, as the gospels say, the light of the world, the true light that was coming into the world. Jesus comes and draws those who follow him into a different and better light. Jesus invites us to cast off the limits of our vision, to no longer be tricked by the optical illusions that come with our every day way of seeing things and people and events and what we believe. Can it be that Jesus is telling us to stop relying on what we are used to seeing and to stop trusting in what we are accustomed to seeing, and therefore expect to be shown things in a different light? It could be like what Rev. Thomas wrote,

“Jesus gives the disciples the gift of being able to see him as God sees him, a glorious being of dazzling white light. Instead of reflecting the blues and reds and yellows of the invisible spectrum, Jesus reflects God. And we may be visible to each other simply because we reflect and absorb various quantities of white light, but God made us to do and to be much more. God made us to shine.”

We live in a time filled with things that claim to be the shiniest things ever, when every day there is a new thing that promises to lend its shine to us if we keep company with it: some new piece of technology, some mode of transportation, some companionship, some stance or attitude – the world tells us that the radiant thing is out there to pursue and gather up. The gospel makes clear that this is not true. We may have buried our radiance under layers of stuff, but God gives us transfigured eyes so that we might see in new ways, so that we might begin to see as God sees. With new eyes to see we might recognize that we have gotten ourselves covered with grime, and we can start scraping that off and seeking God’s willing help to let us shine again, or maybe even shine for what we may feel is the very first time.

You know, I have seen these knitted prayer shawls in the company of people we know who have been sick or going through a hard time. With one set of eyes we just see people struggling through, and with the same eyes we see a knitted afghan type thing. But with transfigured eyes we see people keeping that shawl nearby, united in a common faith and common struggle with people who love them and care for them. The little piece of knitted work is not just a blankie or a token of esteem, it is like a sacrament, a work of the hand that is not just a yellow throw, it is a link to the divine, a common bond among those beloved by God. This is a sight for sore eyes, beyond what normal eyes might see.

When Jesus and the disciples come down the mountain, after this great encounter where Jesus is proclaimed Chosen Son of God, and where Jesus's death has been anticipated, they run right into a man whose only son is overcome by a violent and rebellious spirit. The disciples had been unable to do anything about it. It is enough to suggest that with our old eyes, accustomed to seeing things the same old way, this man and his only son are an example of Jesus who in a world that does not recognize his new way, has a hard time making headway, like someone held back by a bad

spirit, and he has to do it all by himself. Is this why he works to shine a new light and transfigure our sight so we might learn to expect to see things differently? Isn't this what Paul is getting at, encouraging the church to not settle for the customary and accepted, but to look for the new things God is doing through Christ?

Carson Rhyne, a professor at Union Presbyterian Seminary wrote once about a prayer shawl ministry at the church he attends in Richmond. He had really not paid any attention to it. But he told how his neighborhood was diverse. The family next door were from India and were Hindu. And then a family from Pakistan moved in catty cornered from his house, and they were Muslim. It was an interesting intersection with Christians of several types and then these south Asian folk. As it turned out there was friendliness enough that his family was invited to a Hindu dinner and to a Muslim dinner, so during Advent they had an open house, and they sang carols around the piano, with Hindus and Muslims singing "Joy to the World" and "Away in a Manger". Later on the mother at the home of the Indian Hindus was hospitalized and had surgery. Things were scary for a few days. So, when he went to visit he was sent with a prayer

shawl, which he presented to the family with explanation and willingness to withdraw it if it were an offense. The family very politely accepted it. And the next day when he stopped in, there was the Pakistani Muslim woman, and there was the prayer shawl draped over the shoulders of the Indian woman.

He wrote that he could not see what was truly going on there. But he also felt he was in the presence of something much brighter and transfiguring than anything he could create or manage or control. It was, perhaps, a kind of light that exceeds our ability to see, perhaps the face of God that is too much for us to see face to face, and so real that something new is created in its brightness.

God made us to do so much more. God made us to shine. Amen.