Sermon for The Feast of the Transfiguration (transferred)

Delivered at Christ Church Los Altos on Sunday, August 5, 2018

Title: Lighting the way

Today, as we observe the Feast of the Transfiguration, our readings remind us that being close to God – being proximate to God’s holiness – helps us to see more clearly. That the presence of God is illuminating, shedding light on the world around us and the worlds within us, expanding our horizons, allowing us to notice more, appreciate more, and attend more intentionally. Moses goes up to the top of Mount Sinai to converse with God and comes down with stone tablets engraved with the Ten Commandments, a weighty reminder of God’s covenant with Israel, and unbeknownst to him his face is shining like the sun. Jesus goes up to the mountaintop with Peter and John and James, and while he is there, like Moses, “the appearance of his face changed,” and his clothing becomes a dazzling, even blinding, white.

The readings speak to God’s glory, God’s power, and the mysterious ways we are changed in our drawing near to God, but they also speak to the fearsomeness of these encounters. Moses and Jesus themselves seem somewhat unfazed – they, after all, have made a habit of spending time with God – but Aaron and the Israelites were afraid to approach Moses as he walked toward them. Apparently, this happened over and over again – Moses going up to the mountain and coming down to invite Israel into the conversation – and over time he began to wear a veil over his face so as not to alarm those around him. The Gospel, on the other hand, is a little blunter, saying the disciples were plain old “terrified” by their mountaintop experience. There is something wondrous, and illuminating, and enlivening about the presence of God, and there is something profoundly unsettling and upsetting about it, too.

Soon after I went away to college, my mom and stepfather moved from Cleveland, where I’d grown up, to Ashland, Oregon, and when I joined my sister in San Francisco upon graduation, we often made the trek up I-5 to visit them. Those of you familiar with this stretch of highway know that the 5 reaches its highest elevation at Siskiyou Summit, just before it descends into the Rogue Valley, which encompasses Ashland and some other small towns. But before you get there, you have to make it past Mount Shasta, and navigate the ascents and descents of the mountains in between.
Before moving to the city I had never lived on, let alone driven along, the West Coast. I had never really driven in mountains. But because my sister is - bless her soul - truly terrible at the wheel, I eagerly volunteered to drive this stretch year after year. The first few times we made this trip we always seemed to come to the mountains at night. My headlights cast an eerily thin and limp-looking light across the grey road ahead. I felt my body stiffen as we climbed higher and higher, my hands clench the wheel with each turn, bracing for each difficult descent.

Over time, I came to know the road, and those tense couple hours became less and less intense. But I’ll never forget the first time we approached the mountains under a bright afternoon sun. I was, for the first time ever, looking forward to this drive. I figured the going would be significantly easier with adequate light. I might even enjoy it. Only, that didn’t happen. As Shasta came into view - stunning, magnificent – I was suddenly aware of how truly precarious the road was. Just beyond the fragile guardrail, where in the darkness I imagined a field or gentle slope, the mountain cut sharply down, exposing a treacherous rock face. The turns that seemed trying but exhilarating in the darkness were now just terrifying. And the colors – The blue lakes! The green trees. The orange earth. It was all so beautiful! But instead of comforting me, the vistas were but dangerous distractions. I hated driving Shasta in the sun. I did not want to see.

God has this unsettling way of coming into our lives and turning the lights on. There is something wondrous, and illuminating, and enlivening about the presence of God, and there is something profoundly unsettling and upsetting about it, too, because seeing ourselves and our world clearly also means seeing the broken and treacherous places, noticing what was easier to ignore in the dark, attending to parts and places and people we might rather avoid.

Think about a time when your faith was turned on its head by God’s goodness, God’s grace, and you found yourself reeling, struck to the heart, thinking, “no, it can’t be. Am I really forgiven? Just like that? Am I really so loved? Undeserving little me? Could the stories really be so true? And how could it have taken me so long to see this?” As described in her first book, Take This Bread, Sara Miles was a righteous journalist, an activist community organizer, way too cool and evolved for religion and God and all that, when she stumbled into a beautiful Episcopal Church in Potrero Hill, found herself caught up in the art and music and dancing and sort of stumbled to the altar rail, where she received communion for the first time and, just like that, was suddenly confronted with the truth of God’s love for her, the truth of God’s presence. It was a sudden conversion. Pure gift. And it annoyed her to no end. She hadn’t asked for this. She
didn’t want her whole world to be turned upside down and inside out. But suddenly she saw things she had never seen before, in her own heart and her own neighborhood, and, no matter how much she fought it, she kept coming back to Church for more. God has this unsettling way of coming into our lives and turning the lights on.

Think of the time you read *Invisible Man*, or *Just Mercy*, or *The New Jim Crow*, and wondered, “this just can’t be the same world I live in, the same country I live in. Can it? But what if it is? Could I bear it? Do I really want to know?” and were left wrestling, seeing the systems and the people around you in such a different way. God has this unsettling way of coming into our lives and turning the lights on.

Or think of the trip you took to India, or El Salvador, or China, or Thailand, when you met the most generous people living in the most absolute poverty, with open hands and hopeful hearts, who welcomed you into their homes, who fed you, and asked you to share your story, and left you thinking about how impoverished your own world had become, so full of things and money and stress. And think also of how easy it was to forget that as your plane landed at SFO and you were swept back up in the rush and bustle of life here with its own inertia, its own well-placed blinders and designer sunglasses and tinted windows. Goodness! If God doesn’t have this unsettling way of coming into our lives and turning the lights on. It seems to me the trouble is this: we can’t un-see what we have seen, try as we might, and seeing so much clearer, we also appreciate the darkness – its opacity, its heaviness, its familiar comforts – all the more.

It is a fearsome thing to draw close to God, but it is also a freeing thing, because, eventually, our eyes will adjust, and what seemed too harsh and raw, too beautiful and unbelievable at first, will come into sharper focus, and we’ll find grace there, too, and by that grace we’ll find others rubbing at their bleary eyes willing to be companions in this newly revealed landscape.

Jesus and Moses went up those mountains to draw closer to God, but when Jesus came down, when Jesus took on flesh and chose to live and love among us as one of us, Jesus made it possible for us to draw closer to God here and now. Jesus, literally, showed us the way, not only by walking a path we could follow but by alighting in us the will and vision and the clarity to see it unfolding at our feet. And here is the surprising thing, the really surprising thing: if we want to get proximate to God, if we are willing to draw near, ready to be turned upside down and inside out, then the best thing we can do is to draw closer to the suffering of the world. It seems
counterintuitive. How could that help? What is the point? Especially in a world that tries so hard to convince us that the key to a meaningful life is to avoid suffering at all costs, even if means turning a blind eye to it, but, well, what can I say. God’s logic is often counterintuitive. After all, we’re talking about a God who gifted us eternal life through the cross and a tomb. (I mean, really, whoda thunk?)

I recently spoke with a mother in this area who decided to organize a service event explicitly designed for families which would expose kids aged 5 to 12 to the realities of life for many unsheltered families here in the Bay Area. She has a lot of friends, and a lot of energy, and she quickly had several friends signed up. But as the date of the event got closer and closer – as those families, and particularly those parents – drew closer to the suffering of their neighbors, they started calling her, saying they just weren’t sure they wanted their kids to meet other kids who didn’t have a home, and whose parents didn’t have jobs, and who might have seen some of the scarier parts of life on the streets with their own two eyes. They weren’t sure they could handle having those lights turned on.

Now the organization my friends was working with had on staff people whose only job was to develop age-appropriate activities and facilitate thoughtful conversations around employment, immigration, mental health, housing markets and the like, all of which can contribute to a family finding itself without a roof over their heads, and these potential participants knew this, but as they got closer they started to notice other things, too: all those RVs along El Camino, the unending news articles about our local housing crisis, the Uber drivers who casually mentioning they sleep in their car. A light was shining on familiar things. They were suddenly seeing their world differently, and they weren’t at all sure that was what they wanted.

Reflecting on the light and dark imagery we often use when talking about God, Barbara Brown Taylor, a renowned Episcopal priest and author, once said, “whenever you come up on something about God … that everyone knows is true, step back from the reverential crowd whose gaze is fixed on it and look in the opposite direction—because nine times out of ten there is something just as true back there, though largely ignored because its benefits are less obvious and its truth harder to embrace.”¹ Yes, God’s light nourishes, strengths, sustains, and God’s light

shows us the wholeness of this broken and beloved world. That is just how it goes. When Jesus came down off that mountain to further the work of salvation, to show us the way, to tread the path for us to follow, he could have gone anywhere and done anything, and he went straight to those most in need. The sick. The lost. The lepers. The prisoners. The possessed. The insane. Parents whose children were dying. Children whose parents were nowhere to be found. And he talked with them. And he saw them. And he healed them.

God came into the world, shining that holy and hair-rising light in every direction, and God went straight to the places that were filled with hurt and heartbreak. And so, as long as such places exist, in our world, our families, our hearts, that is where we are called to go, too, bearing that same bright and beautiful beam. After all, in the words of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., “Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that.” May we be so bold as to shine with the light and the love of Christ, casting out all darkness as we go. Amen.