2-22/23-20 The Power of Sonlight Rev. Amy Haines

Matthew 17:1-9

In our parsonage in Deshler, my office was an enclosed room in the basement, with no windows and dark paneled walls. On days of clouds and rain, I didn’t mind my basement office. Yet on days of sunshine and blue sky, I often found myself yearning to work upstairs.

This weekend, I give thanks for the amount of sunshine we have seen. While doctors now proclaim that our bodies need vitamin D from the sun, I believe our souls need the sunshine as rays of hope, that better days are to come, especially in winter. Yes, I still enjoy a good snowstorm, as long as I’m not going anywhere. And I recognize the value of a steady rain, especially after the devastation we have seen in California and Australia from fires following a drought. Yet give me a good day of sunshine, and my heart begins to sing.

There is power in sunlight. Not only for our souls, but also as a renewable energy source.

Scientists continue to find ways to harness the power of the sun and convert it into energy to power our homes and businesses.

Recently, I read an article that even former President Jimmy Carter has invested in the power of the sun. As a man of deep faith, he is constantly looking for ways to care for others. For decades now he has partnered with Habitat for Humanity, offering hope through low income housing.

He has also always been interested in solar power, from his days in the White House to more recently leasing 10 acres of his former peanut farm to become a solar panel farm. That farm now creates enough energy to power half of his hometown of Plains, Georgia!

-inhabitat.com/jimmy-carter-built-a-new-solar-plant-on-his-old-peanut-farm 2-14-17

While scientists continue to study the power of the sun, s-u-n

we Christians continue to experience the power of God’s Son, S-o-n.

The disciples knew that Jesus was a rabbi like no other. Many of the world’s religions today recognize Jesus as a great teacher. Yet the foundation of the Gospels proclaim Jesus was more.

Jesus is more than a great teacher. He offers more than a moral compass. Jesus is the Son of God. Which means he lives and shares and proclaims the power of God Almighty.

As the Gospel of John declares:

What came into being through the Word was life,   
and the life was the light for all people. 1:3b-4

The Word became flesh and made his home among us.  
We have seen his glory, glory like that of a father’s only son,  
full of grace and truth. 1:14

The good news of the Scripture is that Jesus is the Son of God, God with us, fully divine and fully human. He suffered as we suffer. He loved as God loves. He is the Word became flesh, who also showed us the truth of God’s glory.

This is a holy mystery that we proclaim, Jesus, the Son of God, Jesus, God with us. Through Jesus we know we are forgiven. We know we are offered eternal life. And we know that God is still working throughout human history to draw us closer to God and closer to one another.

If Jesus was only human, he could not forgive our sins and offer us eternal life.

If Jesus was only divine, we would question if he really knows our struggles.

The Gospels share with us the stories of Jesus’ empowering ministry and eternal message here on earth. And today’s passage, the story of Jesus’ transfiguration, captures the wonder and mystery and awe of Jesus’ full identity as God with us.

Imagine being one of the disciples who have traveled with Jesus. You were first called to fish for people, and you have seen and experienced many signs and wonders and miracles in Jesus’ presence. You have heard the word of God proclaimed in startling new ways. You have seen the outcast welcomed, and the blind healed. You have seen crowds fed and the waters stilled.

You have seen religious leaders challenged and ordinary men and women invited to follow.

Six days prior, you heard Jesus ask all of the disciples,

“Who do people say that the Son of Man is?”

You and your fellow disciples responded,

“Some say John the Baptist, but others Elijah,

and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.”

Then Jesus asked,

“And what about you? Who do you say that I am?”

Peter responded,

“You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.” (16:13-16)

Christos. Christ. Messiah. Son of the living God.

Peter was affirmed for his insight into Jesus’ full identity, yet even then, did not understand the depth of that identity. For soon after that proclamation Jesus set his face toward Jerusalem, and foretold his upcoming suffering, death and resurrection. That was certainly not the script the disciples expected Jesus the Christ to follow! They wanted a mighty warrior not a suffering servant. They wanted glory not sacrifice. Peter took Jesus aside to rebuke him, and Jesus instead rebuked Peter!

For the next six days, I imagine the disciples struggled with understanding the depth of God’s love, and the need for a suffering Messiah. They heard the words Jesus spoke, yet did not comprehend their meaning.

Then, six days later, Jesus took Peter, James and John up a high mountain, for an experience they would never forget. As you picture this mountain, imagine more a southern Ohio hilltop than a Rocky Mountain high.

There, on that mountaintop, Jesus was transfigured. His entire appearance changed in an instant. “His face shone like the sun, and his clothes became dazzling white.” Suddenly the disciples saw Jesus in all his divine glory, a promise of who he has always been and who he will always be. Imagine the purity and brightness of that light.

Nowadays Hollywood loves to create characters who transfigure, sometimes permanently and sometimes on occasion, but often these characters move from what they were into their worst selves. Aliens, an angry hulk, fairy tale villains come to life—these are all examples of Hollywood transfigurations. Rarely does Hollywood reveal a better self within, except for Gandalf the Gray in The Lord of the Rings and Princess Fiona in Shrek who stays an ogre true to love.

The Biblical model of transfiguration is Jesus, showing the fullness of his glory to his closest disciples, the fullness of his true self.

As Jesus glowed in his divine glory, Moses and Elijah appeared, the two greatest figures of the Jewish faith, representing the Law and the Prophets. The Gospel said these two men began to talk with Jesus. I have always wondered what they began to talk about, as Jesus glowed and the disciples looked on in astonishment!

Peter, yearning to respond to such a moment, spoke up and offered to build three tents. He wanted to do something to honor the moment, something to capture the wonder of their presence.

Yet even before Peter was done speaking, he was interrupted by the voice and the presence of Almighty God. Since no one could see the face of God and live, God surrounded that mountain top in a cloud, then proclaimed in a loud voice:

“This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased. Listen to him!”

What was proclaimed at Jesus’ baptism at the very beginning of his ministry is once again proclaimed as Jesus begins the long road to the cross.

The disciples collapsed face first to the ground, as anyone would in the presence of such divinity. They were filled with awe. They were filled with wonder. And they were filled with fear.

How would you respond if you were suddenly surrounded by the greatness of God’s presence?

How would you respond to such a moment of God’s glory? Would any of us stand there in awe and wonder, or would we fall to the ground in worship? Would we be in fear because of our sinfulness or want to celebrate that God has allowed us such a glimpse into his glory?

When I try to imagine such glory I am reminded of a song by Christian artists Mercy Me,

“I Can Only Imagine.”

The lyrics include these words:

“Surrounded by your glory/What will my heart feel/

Will I dance for you Jesus/ Or in awe of you be still/

Will I stand in your presence/ Or to my knees will I fall/

Will I sing hallelujah/ Will I be able to speak at all/

I can only imagine/I can only imagine.”

The disciples were face first on the ground, in fear and awe of what they had seen and heard and experienced. Then Jesus came over to them, and lovingly touched them, and invited them to rise up and not be afraid. As they lifted their eyes to Jesus, they saw that he was alone, and no longer shining brilliantly. The moment of transfiguration was over.

Yet Peter, James and John would never be the same. They had firsthand experience of the power of Sonlight. They had seen Jesus in all of his divine glory. They had heard the voice of Almighty God affirming Jesus’ identity. While the world around them had not changed, they were changed.

They had seen Jesus’ divinity on full display, and had to readjust their thinking beyond an extraordinary rabbi to the Son of God. They had to reflect back and recognize the ways they had already seen glimpses of Jesus’ glory and power in his ministry. Jesus’ power had been on display when he spoke kindly to ostracized women and outcast lepers. Jesus’ power had been on display when he wept over a dear friend and smiled gently at a misguided yet earnest rich young ruler. Jesus’ power soon would be on display on an old rugged cross and in the wonder of an empty tomb.

In what ways have we seen glimpses of Jesus’ power and glory in our lives today? Maybe you have caught a glimpse of divine glory in the bread and cup of holy communion or through a specific Scripture or song. Maybe you caught a glimpse of divine glory through a moment of grace with a co-worker or spouse or even a stranger in the grocery aisle. Maybe you caught a glimpse of divine glory in the face of a child or young adult when they realize they are loved. Maybe you caught a glimpse of divine glory in the face of an adult who have been transformed from anger to peace or from addiction to the promise of new life.

No matter where we experience God’s glory, on a mountaintop, in a worship service, in the ordinary moment of an ordinary day, the power of Sonlight is the same—it is the power to change, the power to heal, the power to transform a life in need of grace.

Father Greg Boyle has experienced the power of God’s presence in his life and seeks to share that same powerful presence of God in the lives of gang members in the neighborhoods of Los Angeles. The ministry is not easy.

..In his twenty years there he has seen things that might make anyone give up hope. He has buried many teenagers who were victims of gang warfare. He has watched mothers bury not one but all their sons. He has sat by beds of shooting victims and beating victims in hospitals, some of whom never recover.

He says mass in 25 jails, but he has also started a business that employs ex-gang members, since kids coming out of prison who are tattooed from head-to-toe are not exactly what employers have in mind when looking for people to man their counter or their cash register.

So he started a silk-screen t-shirt factory, and he employs kids there. In the factory kids from rival gangs work side-by-side.

"Usually," says Father Boyle, "when a kid begins and is told there will be former members of rival gangs at work beside him, the kid will say, 'Well, I just won't talk to them.' But after a time and a short time at that, they do begin to talk, and they get to know each other. And the old label of enemy or rival gives way to the name co-worker and sometimes friend."

--Catherine Taylor “Keeping It Real” 2-3-08 day1.org adapted

The power of Sonlight is also the power of Jesus’ presence with us, no matter what we face in life, reminding us that we are never alone on our journeys of faith.

When the disciples looked up and the brightness of Transfiguration was gone, Jesus was still there, encouraging them to rise up and not be afraid. Jesus was still with the disciples when they came down from the mountain into the real world of suffering and need. Worship on the mountain led to ministry down below. Our mountaintop experiences in life ground us in who and whose we are so we are then able to go and be Christ’s presence in this world with others.

If our mountaintop experience was a mission trip, we might continue to lift up the issues of affordable housing, decent wages, or hunger and homelessness.

If our mountaintop experience was a Spirit-filled worship service, we might find ways to worship the Lord with the same energy no matter what type of setting we may find ourselves in.

If our mountaintop experience was a retreat, we might find ways to alter our lifestyles to allow room for Sabbath rest and intentional prayer in order to feed our spirits.

If our mountaintop experience was a revival, we might find ways to continue to serve and praise the Lord in the midst of our congregation and community.

Whether through a mountaintop experience or the grace of an everyday moment, whenever we experience the power of God’s Son in our lives--loving us, calling us, forgiving us, empowering us--our challenge is allowing that moment to change us, so that we can share the power and grace and love of God to others.

How have you experienced a glimpse of God’s glory, a glimpse of God’s grace, a glimpse of God’s love, through God’s Son Jesus? Celebrate that glimpse this morning. Worship in awe and wonder.

Then how has your experience of God’s glory changed how you live in response to others?

In what ways has Jesus’ teachings changed you? In what ways has Jesus’ grace forgiven you and freed you for new life? In what ways does your life now mirror the life of Jesus, led by the Holy Spirit?

Jesus says to us today, in the power of his Sonlight,

Come and follow me.

Rise up. Do not be afraid. I am with you.

Now go and live in my power and presence,

proclaiming my good news to the world around you.

God, guide us to respond to glory with faith. May it be so.