

**2 Peter 1:16-21**

**Mark 9:2-13**

**February 14, 2021**

***Transfiguration of the Lord***

*Preached by Philip Gladden at the Wallace Presbyterian Church, Wallace, NC*

**THE LIGHT OF GLORY IN THE SHADOW OF DEATH**

***Let us pray: Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.***

In 1650, English theologian and historian Thomas Fuller wrote these words in his religious travelogue called *A Pisgah-Sight of Palestine and Its Confines Thereof*: “It is always darkest just before the day dawneth.” Two hundred years later, in his book *Songs and Ballads*, Samuel Lover attributed the saying to the Irish. He wrote, “There is a beautiful saying amongst the Irish peasantry to inspire hope under adverse circumstances: ‘Remember,’ they say, ‘that the darkest hour of all, is the hour before day.’”<sup>1</sup>

After a year of pandemic darkness, we hope that saying is true. Here is a sampling of some headlines and story ideas along those lines:

- From the Aiken, SC *Post and Courier* – “Some light in the pandemic darkness” – “Amid all the gloom and doom to start the new year – and there has been plenty – there are some signs of good things happening around Aiken County.”
- From the San Diego *Union Tribune* – “In the darkness of the pandemic, Words Alive keeps the literacy light burning” – “Like so many of us, Words Alive was looking at the most challenging chapter of its life so far. But the light of literacy just kept on burning.”
- From the Boulder, CO *Daily Camera* – “Finding light in darkness of pandemic” – “In that same spirit, and as the light at the end of the proverbial tunnel appears in the form of protective vaccines, I’ve been reflecting recently on other uplifting lights in the darkness I’ve witnessed over the past year.”
- From the London *Free Press* – “Dawn’s light slowly emerging to dispel pandemic darkness” – “So, dawn is coming, but not for a while. We’ll have to bring our own light to the darkness, protecting each other by staying apart during what’s always been the most social time of the year. Our winter walks are going to be a slog, but we can’t be afraid of the dark.”
- From *The Denver Post* – “This winter try to find light in the reflection of a dark 2020” – “But as daylight once again begins to lengthen in the new year we must not let a rush to ‘return to normal’ cause us to forget what we learned in the darkness.”

On this Sunday before Ash Wednesday and the beginning of the season of Lent, we need the hope of a light shining in the darkness. Our country needs the hope of a light shining in the darkness. This hurting world needs the hope of a light shining in the darkness. And today’s gospel story gives us the hope of a light shining in the darkness, the light of glory in the shadow of death.

In light of those headlines (pun intended), listen again to Mark's description of that wondrous, mysterious, terrifying event on the mountaintop: "Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and John, by themselves. And he was transfigured before them, and his clothes became dazzling white, such as no one on earth could bleach them. And there appeared to them Elijah with Moses, who were talking with Jesus." (Mark 9:2-4)

But that dazzling transfiguration mountaintop experience is surrounded by the shadow of death. Just a week before, after Peter made *the* confession of faith – "You are the Messiah" – Jesus "began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again." (Mark 8:29-31) And Peter rebuked him . . .

Maybe that's why Peter wanted to stay up on the mountaintop, basking in the reflected glory. He suspected what might be waiting for them down in the valley. And Peter's suspicions were well founded. "As they were coming down the mountain, [Jesus] ordered them to tell no one about what they had seen, until after the Son of Man had risen from the dead" (which, of course, meant that the Son of Man [who is Jesus] had to die first). Today's story ends with these ominous words from Jesus, "How then is it written about the Son of Man, that he is to go through many sufferings and be treated with contempt? But I tell you that Elijah has come, and they did to him whatever they pleased, as it is written about him." (Mark 9:12-13)

As we continue to slog our way through the darkness of this pandemic and all of the other challenges of life, we might feel just as Peter did, who apparently wanted to stay up on the mountain, bathed in the light of that marvelous experience, safely tucked away from the nitty-gritty demands of life. But Jesus took Peter, James, and John back down the mountain, right into the midst of human suffering – a boy had a spirit that made him unable to speak, dashed him to the ground, and made him foam at the mouth, grind his teeth, and become rigid.

Over the years, many people have told me, one way or another, that they don't really like the season of Lent. They say it's too depressing, too sad, too hard to bear. All of that can be true, because it's hard to look at our lives honestly and take stock of how we stray from following God's ways – especially when we have to descend from the mountaintop into the valley of the shadow of death. But we don't walk that path alone. Jesus calls us to walk with him through this season of Lent as we think about Jesus' life and death, what they mean for our discipleship, and how they prepare us for our celebration of Easter in seven weeks.

In his commentary blog on this wondrous story, Matt Skinner writes, "The bright light of the Transfiguration affirms life, a light that shines into Lent to keep that season in perspective, never without hope and confidence. This light speaks a promise that God is here. And that God is knowable. God seeks relationship. Because God is life."<sup>2</sup>

People who have toured the Holy Land have told me about standing on the Mount of Olives and looking west to see Jerusalem on top of Mount Zion. One travel agent suggests, "Getting to the Mount of Olives from Jerusalem is pretty easy." Of course, she admits that's if you take a taxi or public transport or book one of her tours.

She cautions, “I don’t recommend you to climb and go down on foot because the hill is pretty steep and you’ll waste a lot of energy going up and down. You’d better save the energy and visit all the important sites from the Hill!”<sup>3</sup>

Wouldn’t it be easier and more convenient if you could just jump from the Mount of Olives over to Mount Zion instead of having to make that steep climb down to the valley and back up again? Of course it would. On this Sunday before Ash Wednesday and the beginning of Lent, wouldn’t it be nicer if we could just jump from the glory of the Mountain of Transfiguration to the glory of Easter Sunday, without having to go down into the valley of the shadow of death that leads to the cross of Good Friday? Of course it would, but that’s not how it works in the gospel story, in our discipleship as we follow Jesus, or in our lives.

As we stand on the Mount of Transfiguration this Sunday before Lent begins, let me go back, paraphrase some of the comments about finding light in the pandemic darkness, and apply them to our Lenten journey.

- So, Easter dawn is coming, but not for a while. Our Lenten walks are going to be a slog, but we can’t be afraid of the dark.
- We must not let a rush to Easter Sunday cause us to forget what we learned in the darkness.
- As the Easter light at the end of the proverbial tunnel appears on this Sunday in mid-February in the glory of Jesus on the mountaintop, let us reflect on how that glorious light shines through the darkness, and the darkness cannot overcome the light of Christ.

“Lord, the light of your love is shining, In the midst of the darkness, shining, Jesus, Light of the world shine upon us, set us free by the truth you now bring us, Shine on me, Shine on me. Lord, I come to your awesome presence from the shadows into your radiance, by the blood I may enter your brightness, search me, try me, consume all my darkness, Shine on me, shine on me. Shine, Jesus, Shine!”

***Let us pray: Almighty God, whose Son was revealed in his majesty before he suffered death upon the cross: may we have faith to perceive his glory; may we be strengthened by his grace; and may we be changed into his likeness, from glory to glory. Amen.***

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>The Phrase Finder, “The meaning and origin of the expression: The darkest hour is just before the dawn,” at [www.phrases.org.uk](http://www.phrases.org.uk).

<sup>2</sup>Matt Skinner, “Commentary on Mark 9:2-9,” February 15, 2015 at [www.workingpreacher.org](http://www.workingpreacher.org).

<sup>3</sup>Sonia Hash, “How do you get from Jerusalem to Mount of Olives?” at [www.worldwidetravel.tips/israel](http://www.worldwidetravel.tips/israel).