

Transformed by Light

Just two weeks ago, I was walking with friends at Crissy Field, which is the beach at the former Presidio of San Francisco, between the Mission district and Fort Point, in the shadow of the Golden Gate Bridge. It was early evening, and their two dogs were racing over the sand and playing in the water, while we humans watched the sunset over the ocean. When I turned back towards the bay, pink and golden spots of light were dancing on the Berkeley Hills to the east of us. In spite of the typical overcast sky, the colors of the sunset were being reflected by hundreds of windows. We couldn't see the houses, but they were acting like mirrors all the same. But even while we watched, the spots of reflected light blinked out, as the angle of the sunlight changed and faded. For those few minutes, the grey and hulking east bay hills had been transformed – *transfigured* – into something brilliant and beautiful.

I can't help wondering if the transfiguration of Jesus was something like that – brilliant, brief, and blinding – and most of all, memorable. It is one of the few events that comes to us in all four of the New Testament gospels, and for our first century ancestors, it wove together characters, stories, and language into a compelling story.

First the characters: Moses and Elijah, the giants of the Hebrew Scripture. Both of them were supporters of the Torah (the Jewish law) and both were known for performing miracles. Elijah was taken up into heaven without having died (that story is in 2 Kings 2:11), and some early legends about Moses (not in scripture) suggest that he was also taken up into heaven. These were figures well known to the first hearers of this story. Perhaps the best modern equivalent is to imagine climbing the Hill of Three Oaks in the Arb and seeing me talking with George Washington and Eleanor Roosevelt. Even a single glance at the scene would fill it with layers of political and historical meaning; that was likely the same experience that Peter, James, and John had on their high mountain.

Next, the stories: this brief tale evokes memories of several other Biblical narratives. In the book of Exodus, we learned that Moses went up a mountain in search of God, and he, too, returned with a shining face. The words of God that Peter, James, and John heard are echoes of the words that accompanied the baptism of Jesus by John in the Jordan. Jesus is not the first voice to say, "Do not be afraid;" the angels who had visited Mary and Elizabeth and Joseph and the shepherds had all brought those words of reassurance. And the reason he is not the first to offer reassurance is that fear is a recurring theme in stories of people who encounter God (more about that in a minute ...)

And finally, the language: certain words connect us to other images in the scripture. For example, the word translated as "transfigured" is used elsewhere in the New Testament,

for example, in the book of Romans (12:2): “*be transformed by the renewing of your minds.*” We are reminded that the process of change is not only about outer appearance, but also about inner understanding. And the word “overshadowed” is one that we heard in the nativity narrative, in the angel Gabriel’s answer to Mary’s wonderment: “*The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will called holy, the Son of God.*” [Luke 1:35] The word that describes Jesus’ clothing in this story (translated as “dazzling”) comes from a root word that means “light.”

It is no coincidence that this story of dazzling light comes at the end of the season of Epiphany. The season began with the light of the star that brought the magi to the home of the infant Christ child. If we were to pick a theme text for the season, we might well choose the opening words of the fourth gospel, which we will share today as our closing words: “*The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.*” [John 1:5] And if we were to choose a theme song, it might be the one we will sing at the end of the service, whose refrain is “*Jesus, the light of the world ..*” [NCH # 160].

Which brings me back to the dancing splashes of brightness on the Berkeley hills: they were all *reflections*. The real light, the source of the light, was behind us. What we were seeing was the sunset from a different point of view.

Imagine with me, for a moment, being with Peter, James, and John on that climb with Jesus. Imagine seeing the appearance of your beloved teacher flash with beautiful intensity. And imagine realizing that this beautiful intensity is actually the reflection of an even more beautiful and more intense light, a light with a voice: “*This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!*” [Matthew 17:5]

It is no wonder, is it, that the three disciples were terrified. As strange as the events were in front of them, something even bigger was happening behind them: the presence of God. The source of the light that shone in and around and from and through Jesus was the powerful love of God.

We are not inclined, in our progressive Christian, liberal protestant tradition, to talk much about the “fear of God.” Our faith is grounded in God’s love and in God’s yearning for peace, justice, healing, and reconciliation – and all of those seem inconsistent with a God of whom we would be afraid. Moreover, a fair number of folks in our congregation were frightened or distressed as children by stories and images of an angry and vengeful God, and we are mindful of the danger those stories and images can present.

Still, we cannot deny that the Bible is full of people who live in “fear of God,” and that this “fear” is seen as a virtue. One way to explain this is to say that the word translated as “fear” is equally well expressed as “awe” or “overwhelmed by.” And this is true. But we also need to acknowledge that we have reason to be afraid in the presence of God. The reason is simple: we are not the people we would like to be, and the presence of God’s love and compassion make us painfully, ruefully, shamefully aware of that. Our

shortcomings, foibles, errors, sorrows, and mistakes – our sinfulness -- are starkly illuminated by the very source that brings light into the world.

But what is really overwhelming, what is really awe-inspiring, what is really scary, is that the source of light that reveals all of the shadows in our lives is also the source of mercy. For reasons that I do not entirely understand, the prospect of being held in divine love that is deep, enduring, and forgiving is a profoundly disorienting and sometimes even disturbing experience for most of us. If we are honest, we know we have not earned it. Like the disciples, we are overcome by the very idea, and fall to the ground.

I don't need to tell you that the fear of God's mercy is an entirely different matter from the fear of terrorism, or the fear of economic hardship, or the fear of moral decay. These modern-day fears diminish us; they make us less generous, less cooperative, and less hospitable. These modern day fears drive us to think more about ourselves and less about our neighbors, and to see fewer and fewer people as our neighbors. The fear of God's mercy, on the other hand, enriches us. Being aware of God's grace makes us genuinely humble, and opens our hearts and hands to greater generosity, more willing cooperation, and warmer hospitality. Knowing that we are held in holy love frees us to think less about ourselves and more about our neighbors, and to expand our circle of neighborliness to include all of God's creation.

The Epistle reading we heard this morning, from Second Peter, was almost certainly not written by the disciple who was present on the mountain with Jesus. All the same, it captures the sense of someone reflecting back on the powerful mountaintop experience many years later. This is the advice we are given: *"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."* [2 Peter 1:19]

There are beaches to walk and hills to watch and mountains to climb in this life, and only very occasionally do they light up and shine with the power and love of God. But when they do, we will do well to be attentive to them and to the holy light that they are reflecting. And when they do, we will also do well to listen for the voice that says, "Get up, and do not be afraid."