

Look to the Light

a sermon

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Trinity Reformed Church

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Mark 9:2–9

II Corinthians 4:3–6

One of the things I love about living in the Northeast is the snow. Sorry, Ken. (Ken Midavaine will be first to disagree with me on this, think I'm crazy to feel this way.) But I do like the snow, and I'd much prefer to have snow in the winter here. What's the alternative, really? For Rochester, it's a winter full of gray and gloom, snuggled as we are beneath a blanket of clouds for months on end.

Why do you think my daughter left western New York? After her twelfth winter up here she'd had it: the gray and the gloom, the slush and the muck.

But with snow on the ground in the winter, it's quite a bit brighter out. Walking over here early this morning, I thought it was absolutely beautiful. And when the clouds do disperse (hey, it happens!), then it's quite spectacular, with the snow reflecting back the bright light of the sun. There are times when the light off the snow is so bright it's painful, especially if you've forgotten to take along your sunglasses.

Of course, the snow itself doesn't *create* the light. We all know that. The blanket of white on the ground is not the source of the illumination. The snow only reflects back to us the rays it receives from the sun, which of course is the source of the light. Uncountable protons moving at around 186 thousand miles per second stream through the 93 million miles of empty space until they reach the earth and then the snow that lies at our feet. None of us believe that the snow generates its own light; we all know that it merely reflects what it receives from a source far greater than itself.

Imagine that the snow could talk, and in this make-believe tale it started talking about its own brilliance. "Just look at me!" it says to itself. "Look at how beautiful I am. Look at how bright I am. People are in awe of my brilliance; they gasp in awe at the glory I generate!" But the sun, shining brightly onto the snow from overhead, just smiles, knowing what truly is the source of this brilliance, and that underneath the sun's rays the snow will soon melt away.



I know, it's a silly fable. But it seems to me that we sometimes flirt with a similar conceit, thinking

we are in and of ourselves the source of brilliance,
the creator of our beauty,
the cause of what is admirable in us.

This idea is a conceit. It is a corrupt idea. It is a sub-Christian fantasy. For when we think this way, when we act as if we believe this, then we forget that what is good in us is visible only

because it is illuminated, brought out of the dark into the light, by the one who is outside and above and before us: our risen Lord, Jesus Christ, who with the Father and the Spirit creates, and restores, and brings all beauty to completion.

I think that this is why Paul had to tell his friends in Corinth what he told them. What was that? What did he tell them? “For we do not proclaim ourselves; we proclaim Jesus Christ as Lord and ourselves as your slaves for Jesus’ sake.”

It isn’t *we* who are so great, says Paul, not we who preached with power among you. It’s Jesus Christ, *he* who is so great, so brilliant, so bright. And it is him whom we proclaim. Our message is not ourselves. For that, Paul might say, would be the conceit of the snow believing that it is the source of its own light, rather than light reflected from a source greater and purer and more holy.

I believe what Paul says is an important reminder for us. We need to be reminded,

that the message is not about us,
but about him who saves us;
the message is not about our goodness,
but about him who makes us good;
the message is not about how loving *we* are,
but about him who loves us and makes us capable of loving.

The message is not about our generosity, or our forgiving spirit, or our moral virtuousness; no, it is about him

whose generosity exceeds all expectations;
whose forgiveness shames even the most charitable;
whose character shows our greatest virtues to be mere vices,
whose strength is in taking our faulty selves
and making them shine with his light.

We need to be reminded, that *he* is the light, and we are those who may reflect the light. We are not the light. But, Lord willing, we may become children of the light,

whose lives proclaim Christ,
whose walk and talk are illuminated by his glory,
whose doing and speaking reflect his light for all around.

We need to be reminded, because we have such a strong tendency to turn the message of *Christ* into the message of *self*. We are adept at turning the subject to ourselves:

from God, to us;
from the work of Christ, to our own works;
from the movement of the Holy Spirit, to our own “spirituality.”

But the light of Christ has a way of showing that there is so much more.



That's what seems to have happened that day on the mountain.

As we heard in the reading from the Gospel of Mark, Peter, James, and John followed Jesus up a mountain. They went with him, even though they don't seem to have known exactly why they went. Perhaps they thought, "ah, yes, I need a little vacation. Let's get away from the people for a while, slow down, recharge, rest."

And so they went up there, perhaps expecting a little personal time, maybe some rare moments alone with their master.

Soon they reach the top of the mountain, and there they find so much more than they expected, more than they could *possibly* have expected.

With little fanfare, Mark lets us know that Jesus was "transfigured before them." Now that doesn't happen every day! Actually, do we ever use that word, "transfigured"? I don't think so.

Even from when I was a little boy, for years I heard the story of the transfiguration read in church. For years I had no idea what they were talking about.

And to be honest, I'm still not sure I get it.

But you know something: I don't think the disciples — Peter, James, and John — got it either. One moment they're walking along with Jesus, the next they're there with mouths agape as Jesus stood nearby, *with* them and yet *separate from* them, glowing with an other-worldly light.

What did this mean? They thought they knew Jesus. But now, he stood before them as before, and yet different, shown to be greater, *far* greater than they had realized.

And then there came a voice, not just any voice, but even though unidentified by Mark a voice unmistakably the voice of God: "This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!"

What is this supposed to mean?

No doubt those three disciples went down the mountain scratching their heads over what they had just seen and heard.

What is this supposed to mean?

I'm certain that its meaning far exceeds what can be explored in one little sermon, even many sermons.

What is this supposed to mean?

Perhaps at least one thing it means is this: Jesus was more than they had thought he was.

At the very least, that's what they came down from the mountain knowing, that their Lord was more than they had realized. His true nature was greater than what they had been ready to accept. His meaning could not be contained by what they thought they knew.

It was as if they had been asked to pour a big bag of grain into a teacup: there's no way it would all fit. When they came down from that mountain, they didn't know everything about Jesus. Instead, what they knew was that there was so much more to Jesus for them to know, more than they could ever fully know. They now knew that they could no longer assume

that Jesus was all about them,
that *his* goals were *their* goals,
that *his* path was *their* path,
that he would be just who they wanted and expected him to be.



Of course, they hadn't completely learned it. Old habits die hard: habits of acting, habits of thinking. It would take them some time to learn this lesson, and it could even be argued that they never truly learned it, that the struggle of these disciples, as for *all* disciples, including us, is the struggle to resist putting Jesus into our own little boxes. It's the struggle to proclaim *Jesus*, to proclaim him *truly*, and not to proclaim *ourselves*.

For our secret desire and our not-so-secret conceit is for *us* to *be* the light that shines so brightly, rather than to be content to live as those who just see the light and then try to reflect it. But the lesson the disciples learned on that mountain is our lesson to learn, too: that Jesus shines with an otherworldly light not of our making, and only by accepting who he really is can we truly appreciate and reflect his light.

We need this lesson. We all must learn this lesson. For just as we dearly love to proclaim ourselves, so, too, do we tend to limit Jesus by making him an extension of ourselves and our interests.

In him we seek confirmation of our values.
By him we want promotion of our politics.
From him we expect approval of our miserly rationing of love.

And so we see him as

a good American;
a good Republican
or a good Democrat;
the supreme supporter of the rights of women
or the supreme advocate for the rights of the unborn;
the quintessential family man;
the paragon of virtues
that we know all too well
because they are *our* virtues.

What so often happens, then, is we come to see the Christian life as *our* life, rather than as the life we live in the spirit of those great words from the Heidelberg Catechism:

*What is your only comfort in life and in death?
That I am not my own,
but belong body and soul,
in life and in death
to my faithful Savior,
Jesus Christ.*

And what also so often happens is that we come to see the *church* of Jesus Christ as *our* church; and then we forget the truth of some other great words from the Catechism, that

the Son of God
through his Spirit and Word,
... gathers, protects, and preserves
for himself
a community chosen for eternal life
and united in true faith.

When you belong to Jesus Christ, your life is not your own. This church is not our own. Our selves, our personalities, our bodies, our living, our breathing, our dying, our church, these all belong to Jesus.

Of course, it's just a phrase, we don't mean anything by it, when we talk about "my church," just as we don't mean anything terribly profound if we are to speak of "my life." Yet the casual phrases must never lull us into forgetting that indeed this life we have is not truly ours, nor is this church truly ours. Both belong to Christ.

A colleague of mine, John, was a pastor in Dallas. And one time, back when I lived in the Dallas area, I asked him, "So, John, how are things going with your church?" And he said to me (in a way that was just a bit annoying), "No, Dan. It's not *my* church. It's the church of Jesus Christ. I just work there."

(Okay, John. I stand corrected.)

I now sometimes say that. Or I think it. This is not my church. It's Christ's church. I just work here. And when I do, I don't believe I am being disrespectful. I don't think I'm shirking my responsibilities. *I* think (and I hope) that I am remembering who this is all about, who it's for, who makes it possible. And it's not me. It's not you. It's Jesus.

My friends, I urge you to live as those who knowingly and joyfully reflect the love of Jesus Christ. Shine! shine: with the humble conviction

that his love is far greater than we can know,
his wisdom is far deeper than we can grasp,
his meaning is far beyond our own programs and priorities,
and his forgiveness is meant even for us.