

TRANSFIGURATION The Star Rising in Your Hearts

2 Peter 1:16-21

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Sunday, March 6, 2011

Chapel at 8, Sanctuary at 9:15 and 11 a.m.

The Second Letter of Peter begins with the words,

[Simon] Peter, a servant and apostle of Jesus Christ, To those who have received a faith as precious as ours through the righteousness of our God and Savior Jesus Christ; May grace and peace be yours in abundance in the knowledge of God and of Jesus our Lord.

This is such a rich expression of faith from Peter, which he writes toward the end of his life! In chapter 1 he explains his reason for making this affirmation: *I think it right, as long as I am in this body, to refresh your memory, since I know that my death will come soon, as indeed our Lord Jesus Christ has made clear to me. And I will make every effort so that after my departure you may be able at any time to recall these things.*

What is happening here is that an elderly Peter, counting his last days, wants to pass on an assurance that the proclamation of the good news concerning Jesus, his friend, rests on a firm foundation, and comes to them by good authority.

This news concerning the saving power of Jesus, by way of his life, teachings, death, and resurrection, is not the result of *cleverly devised myths*. It is grounded in his own personal witness of God granting all his authority to his Son, and on the witness of prophets, as recorded in the Old Testament, inspired by the Holy Spirit himself.

I can't imagine a message more relevant to our contemporary culture, in which the Christian faith is often posited as simply one religion among others to choose from. I once had a man tell me he wasn't really one to go to church much, but he said he wished that in school he had been taught about all the world religions, so he could have made an informed choice. I'm sure you've heard people say similar things, because it is a popular concept in our culture today.

Behind that thought are a couple of assumptions. One is that the Christian faith is an intellectual pursuit for the classroom, a subject to be studied, objectively examined, and tested for consistency. Another assumption is that the Christian faith is a matter of informed and personal preference; that it is about us making a choice for God, rather than the other way around.

In truth our faith is about a relationship with a person who walked this earth, whom we know as God and as one who forgives, loves, and leads us in a rich new way of life. So rich, in fact, that we cannot turn away from him, at least not for long. We know this because we try to run away at times, and we always end up coming back. He pursues us even more than we pursue him. He first chooses us, then we choose him.

We can be led in a lot of directions, but we follow Jesus Christ because the power of his way has become not an option for us, but a certain course, which has been passed down from generation to generation of believers because of the power of his message. That is essentially what Peter is getting at in this letter, and what he wants to pass on to his readers before his body gives out. He wants them to know that Jesus has the power and that those who have preached and taught that message, as he has for years, have done so with authority. He warns them that they should not be swayed by false prophets who, he says, *arose among the people, just as there will be false teachers among you, who will secretly bring in destructive opinions.*

He does not want them to think it was all made up to persuade people to follow a charismatic leader whose movement relies on a new generation of followers to flourish. They didn't make this up. They saw his miracles with their own eyes and heard his teachings with their own ears. He appeared to Peter and the others after his resurrection. Their lives were changed; now they know and trust, for eternity.

Peter continues: *For we did not follow cleverly devised myths when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we [meaning he and the other apostles] had been eyewitnesses of his majesty.* This is Peter's point in conveying his description of his experience with James and John, also related in Matthew 17, of seeing Jesus transformed in light atop a mountain, a moment we know as the transfiguration. Beside Jesus stood Moses and Elijah. The apostles heard the Lord's voice saying, as he did at Jesus' baptism, *This is my Son, my Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.*

Some see the transfiguration as an affirmation of Jesus' identity as God's Son. Some, as a foreshadowing of the power of his resurrection; and finally, others see it as an earthly glimpse of Jesus' heavenly reign in glory, to be fully revealed at the end of time, referenced in the use of the word *majesty*. All of these point to Jesus possessing the full power and authority of God. Jesus truly is the Son of God, to whom God is pleased to grant all authority to bless, redeem and make whole everyone whose life has been shattered by sin.

Peter goes further to say, *So we have the prophetic message more fully confirmed.* By which he means that his apostolic witness of Jesus' transfiguration is only further evidence of what the prophets had been pointing to for centuries before. He adds, to counter the relativism of his own time, *...you must understand this, that no prophecy of scripture is a matter of one's own interpretation.* Rather, he is saying, the prophets spoke by the prompting and direction of the Holy Spirit, who is to be trusted.

In verse 19 Peter encourages us, *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. I like so much about that sentence and the imagery he uses to communicate the hope of the Gospel. These are words that point us to the return of Christ, to looking forward with eager anticipation, as he says, *until the day dawns.* The thought closes with that beautiful phrase which is worth committing to memory, *and the morning star rises in your hearts.*

In the last chapter of Revelation we read, *It is I, Jesus, who sent my angel to you with this testimony for the churches. I am the root and the descendant of David, the bright morning star.* I like the idea of the bright morning star rising in our hearts, because it is so full of promise and hope. It causes me to look upon others, who are in dark places in their lives, as those on whom goodness is about to dawn. It is an attitude of beatitude! *Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of God!* (Matthew 5:3)

It causes me to reflect how with each new day, we can look to the future with hope, because Christ is rising. Where is he rising? From within, from within our very selves, by faith. This is not simply one religion to choose from among others; this is living hope in the person of God's very Son, his beloved, who accompanies and equips us in our journey into his kingdom.

In *Mere Christianity* C.S. Lewis writes, "People often think of [the Christian life] as a kind of bargain in which God says, 'If you keep a lot of rules, I'll reward you, and if you don't I'll do the other thing.' I do not think that is the best way of looking at it. I would much rather say that every time you make a choice you are turning the central part of you, the part of you that chooses, into something a little different than it was before.

"And taking your life as a whole, with all your innumerable choices, all your life long you are slowly turning this central thing either into a heavenly creature or into a hellish creature; either into a creature that is in harmony with God, and with other creatures, and with itself, or else into one that is in a state of war and hatred with God, and with its fellow creatures, and with itself.

"To be the one kind of creature is heaven: that is, it is joy, and peace, and knowledge and power. To be the other means madness, horror, idiocy, rage, impotence, and eternal loneliness. Each of us at each moment is progressing to the one state or the other."¹

Peter writes at the end of his letter, *Therefore, beloved, while you are waiting for [the return of Christ], strive to be found by him at peace, without spot or blemish; and regard the patience of the Lord as salvation.* In the end, we truly are powerless to be found at peace, without spot or blemish, save that the morning star of Christ is rising from within us.

My own fifth grade daughter is studying astronomy in school right now, so we're hearing a lot at home about how the heavens are organized, and how the various objects of the sky are named. The other day, while walking into a store, out of the blue, she pointed up to the sun and said, with the confident flourish of a fifth grader with knowledge to share with the world,

"Dad, do you see the sun? Did you know that's a star?"

"I think I'd heard that somewhere, yes," I responded.

"Well I've got news for you. If you think that's powerful, if you think that's got a lot of energy, you might be surprised!"

"Really," I remarked, "there's more than meets the eye?"

"Yes," she was only too happy to reveal, "there are some stars even bigger than our sun. You just can't tell because they are so far away. And they have a whole lot more power and energy than you can imagine. If they were any closer, they might just burn us up in a flash!"

"Wow...that's power!" I said, "Good thing God has us where we are!"

There is a beauty, I've reflected since, on how God has organized the universe from without and from within, such that we have life so perfectly balanced on this earth and that no power of nature is so great as to completely destroy. But even greater is the realization that we have, by the Holy Spirit, the power of Jesus Christ—his grace, his love his mercy—rising up from within us for the world. Such is his radiance and his majesty, which shines when we forgive someone only God can forgive, when we love someone whom only God could love, and when we serve someone only God would care to serve. He is that morning star rising within our hearts.

To close our message this morning, I want to read a poem written by Esther de Waal from the book, *The Way of Simplicity*. She writes about the Cistercian Trappist life. This is a poem called *Light*, which I thought would be appropriate for us to hear on this Transfiguration Sunday, in which we celebrate and remember how Jesus shone before his apostles as a lamp, a light for the world.

Light

Ah! brothers, [He] is the light to light your tapers from, those lamps which the Lord would have you holding. Go to him and you will be lit up; not so much bearers of lamps as lamps yourselves, shining within and without, lighting yourselves and your neighbours. May this lamp be in heart and hand and mouth: a lamp in your heart to light yourself; a lamp in your hands and on your lips to light your neighbors. The light in your heart is loving faith; the lamp in your hands is the example of good deeds; the lamp on your lips, helpful and strengthening words.

So that you may light all these lamps for yourselves, my brethren, come to the source of light and be enlightened.

When all your lamps are lighted, sons of light you will not walk in darkness, nor will you need to fear the condemnation.

as for you for whom so many lamps are shining, you will see, when your lamp of life is doused, the light of life undying rise like the

blaze of noon in your evening sky. And just when you thought your candle had burned down, you will flame up again and your darkness will be like noonday. You will not need the glory of the sun to light by day, nor will the moonlight shine on you, but the Lord will be your everlasting light: for the Lamb is the lamp of the New Jerusalem, to whom be all blessing and radiance of glory forever and ever. ²

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

¹ C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, rev.ed. (1952; repr., New York: HarperCollins Publishers, Inc., 2001), 92.

² Esther de Waal, *The Way of Simplicity: The Cistercian Tradition* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1998), 85.