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Text: Mark 9:2-9

Turning the Lights On

Did any of you ever play with a Lite-Brite? It was an amazingly simple toy. It was box shaped with one surface riddled with tiny holes. It came with these black pieces of paper with patterns sketched out in gray, and then you would punch brightly colored plastic pegs through the paper and into the screens little openings. As long as you had a decent attention span and avoided eating too many of those Jolly Rancher colored pegs, it was a fun activity. You simply followed the directions, flipped the switch, and voila! The pegs lit up into a clown or an overly angular Bugs Bunny. At least the first few times, it was pretty amazing.

At the referral of a colleague, I picked up a copy of Annie Dillard's *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*. The book contains beautiful ruminations spun from her observations of a secluded woodland outside of Roanoke, Virginia. In a chapter devoted to the mystery of seeing, Dillard tells the stories of the first doctors to perform cataract surgeries on patients who had been born blind. The introduction to sight later in life was especially challenging for the older patients. Their spatial awareness was totally connected to their sense of touch, and they grow frustrated struggling to interpret distance, depth, and color visually.

Meanwhile the simple objects often enraptured the younger patients. Seeing a bunch of grapes for the first time, one boy identified it as "dark, blue and shiny...It isn't smooth, it has bumps and hollows." When a newly sighted girl lays her eyes on a tree, she is overwhelmed by how the sun and shadows dance together on leaves and branches. Grasping it in her hands, she offered a name, "the tree with the lights in it."

After the exciting initial phase and the work of adjusting to the new faculty, seeing became routine and unremarkable. Just as a Lite-Brite initially excites a child and then becomes another toy, those with the newly recovered sight take their vision for granted, as so many of us do. Spending our lives seeing the same things from our particular perspective dulls our sense of wonder. There are so many beautiful and amazing sites that we pass by each day because they are familiar. It takes a force that flips the switch afresh and illuminates the common into something extraordinary.

This morning we read a story from the Gospel of Mark traditionally identified as the Transfiguration of Jesus. To transfigure something is for something to change its appearance to become more beautiful or elevated. What the disciples saw atop the mountain with Jesus was nothing short of extraordinary. Jesus, their beloved teacher, was transfigured. The text reads, "His clothes became dazzling white, such as no one on earth could bleach them."

Frederick Buechner interprets what the disciples saw beautifully:

“It was Jesus of Nazareth all right, the man they'd tramped many a dusty mile with, whose mother and brothers they knew, the one they'd seen as hungry, tired, and footsore as the rest of them. But it was also the Messiah, the Christ, in his glory. It was the holiness of the man shining through his humanness, his face so afire with it they were almost blinded.”

Indeed, Jesus was a familiar part of the disciples' lives. Still as much as Jesus encouraged them to tell no one, his special relationship with the Creator was not a secret. This was the one whom they dropped everything to follow. This was the one who multiplied loaves and fishes to feed the crowds. This was the one who walked on water and tamed the wild seas. This was the one who healed and raised the dead. This was the one whom Peter identified only a chapter before as the Messiah. If we consider everything the disciples witnessed along the way, there must be more to this story than Jesus being both human and divine.

So, how do we interpret that dazzling moment on the mountain top? It was God reaching out to a desensitized people. As in so many of the Gospel stories, the disciples here are stand-ins for you and me. They had become so accustomed to Jesus presence that what was in front of them all along was foggy and unclear. They routinely don't get it. The disciples kept missing how Jesus upended their expectations for a Messiah and so do we. Rather than embracing creation in all of its goodness and our neighbor as ourselves, we have let our brokenness impair our vision. Sounds bites and spin have stripped words of their meaning. The sheer volume of digital communication has created a cesspool of incivility that we partake of and feel powerless to change. We are more connected and yet more divided than ever before. If we believe what we are seeing is truly reality, we could certainly use a vision correction.

Mercifully, our God comes to us in moments of transfiguration. She turns the lights on and makes clear what was foggy in the darkness. God here switches on the lights for the disciples. To enliven their dulled senses, Jesus disrupts Peter, James, and John from their routine and takes them to the mountain top, “apart” from their everyday lives. The Creator makes Jesus resplendent and says, “This is my Son. This is my Child, the Beloved. Listen to Him.”

To respond to the mess, one of my favorite callings of Jesus is his call to contemplation, to time “apart” on top of the mountain. While literal interpretations are not always my favorite, I must admit that my passion is skiing. Enveloped in the beauty of God's creation, I find the mountain views and the rush of accelerating from one turn to the next intoxicating. It turns the lights on for me so I can face the rest of my week clear eyed. I am so enlivened by these moments that I routinely find myself thinking like the disciples. I don't want it to end. If I could afford some mountain real estate, God knows that I would be buying. After the God turns the lights on in our lives, we are not always ready to come down from the mountain.

We know the power of the mountain top and its light-giving magic. We also know that thrust of this passage is not to linger. Our Creator is calling us to listen to Jesus, awaken our senses, and see the light shining through our daily lives. The transfiguration, the cross, and the resurrection are moments that enlighten Jesus' entire life and his living presence with us now. They help us to see Christ at work more clearly.

As you look through the budget one last time before today's vote after worship, take the time to go through it line by line. You will see our commitment to illuminating Christ in the dollars and cents that we collectively devote to the programs that light up our lives and our greater community. We do not pass budgets that are narrowly tailored to facilitate programs that accommodate our individual interests. We do not pass them to bankroll our own personal tabernacles. We pass church budgets as a testament to how the Spirit moves in our collective body, and that means helping to create spaces for Christ's light to shine in places some of us may have had no interest in travelling to before.

One of the most beautiful things about church is that it can be a setting in which Jesus is lit up for us. Surely, you can recall some of these moments over the last year. I want you to take a moment, turn to your neighbor, and share a moment you felt Christ lit up for you in this place. There have been exciting concerts, transformational worship, formational events that have changed the way we see the world and service that has helped reshape it. There have been mountain top moments and those that equip us to see God in the simple. There are surely moments where we feel like we are busying ourselves stuffing plastic pegs through paper sheets, but then the Holy Spirit will whip through and light us up like a Lite-Brite. I have no doubt the living Christ shines in this place.

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