

Transfigured

Scripture Reading: Mark 9: 2-9

I jokingly refer to myself as someone who is solar powered. I need sunlight and lots of it to feel my best. Which is why, when I was in seminary, I was very much against moving to the Oregon coast to do an internship there. I was certain I wouldn't survive the grey days I'd find there.

My prayer had been that God would send me back to the Southwest, where bright skies would keep my batteries charged and my mood elevated.

Despite my love affair with the sun, God made it clear that God wanted me in Oregon. That's when heavy-duty windshield wipers went on the truck and I pointed myself toward the drizzly coast, wondering just how I was going to survive day after day of charcoal skies.

Things were so hectic my first semester that I didn't really notice the clouds overhead. But then January settled in, a long and colorless month, and all of a sudden I couldn't remember the last time I'd seen the sun or felt its warming rays on my skin.

One desperately grey day in early February, I came back from lunch to find a vase of flowers sitting on the desk in my dark-paneled, windowless office. These weren't just any flowers, either. They were explosions of gold, glory in petal form. "In rainy Oregon," the card read, "sometimes we have to make our own sun."

The person who left that note had certainly done that. Had made her own sun. And she'd been kind enough to share that sun with me.

Light. Glory. Brilliance. Luminosity.

Jesus breaks forth today into such dazzling magnificence that he makes the sun itself look washed out and wimpy.

No wonder Peter, James, and John fell down in fear. No wonder building dwelling places for Jesus and his two spiritual mentors seemed appealing. Swinging a hammer is a comforting, familiar thing when that much of God's glory comes bursting forth—and without warning.

We may not be prepared to glimpse that level of divine wattage, but we need to know this much glory exists. We need to be reminded of the scope of God's presence and power.

That's what passages like today's lesson are for. That's what great art and music help us with, as well. But as on those days when a solar eclipse is taking place, to take in such awesomeness as Mark reports might well blind us. It's just too much for ordinary eyes.

I have heard it said that God gives us birth in bodies so that we can slowly grow accustomed to the glorious shining of God's loving presence. The body and its needs shade us, softening the encounter between our souls and God's being. Over time—little by little, experience by experience--we learn to be present to greater amounts of divine light. And learn to be home to it, as well. In every religious tradition, the men and women who succeed in this we call enlightened. Full of light.

It's not as if we're complete strangers to glory, though. We're each born with some of the same light that radiated from Jesus that day on Mount Tabor. Anyone who's ever held a baby knows this.

God's glory comes with us into life. It's this light, the glory we're born with, that makes it possible for us to recognize the great light of God. The God-light we hold inside draws us toward God's perfect light.

That light already held within is what enables us, on rainy Oregon days and every other kind of dismal or threatening day, to make sun for others, to transfigure the dark and the ordinary.

And yet we don't always want to let that light out. We don't always manage to live in ways that allow God to increase the fire in us. How to explain this?

I once read that while the Western church early on developed the notion of original sin as a way of explaining human darkness, the Eastern church saw things differently. Eastern theologians maintained that original immaturity, not original sin, was the reason we cast shadows upon the world rather than bring illumination to it.

On Wednesday, Ash Wednesday, we will gather with our friends at St. Paul's Episcopal to begin our journey into Lent. A journey not unlike Jesus' in that we, too, must leave our high mountains to walk the shadowed valleys below.

What gives us courage to do this, and to keep doing this for the long season of Lent, is the same thing that gave Christ courage. And that is this: the certain knowledge that at the very core of our beings we hold the pure light of God.

What Lent does for us, what Lent does in us, depends on the fundamental question of whether we believe ourselves to be made of light or made of darkness. If we are made of darkness, if at the very core of our being is original sin, then Lent easily becomes a season of self-flagellation and continual punishments.

Yes, it is true that on Ash Wednesday we will be reminded that we are dust and to dust we shall return. But even dust, even this was once the stuff of fire-bright stars. Even dust has its source in God's great shining.

But if the Eastern Church is right, if it's immaturity--rather than sin--that we are born with, then Lent's meaning and work take a different direction spiritually.

If we bring it into the light of God's love, then the recognition of our immaturity can inspire us to ask ourselves some important questions: where and when and how am I refusing to make sun for others?

How and when and why do I hold back the light God is trying to send into the world through my life?

What is keeping me from being the well-lit lamp that God intends me to be?

Where has my immaturity clouded things for God and the world God so desperately loves?

No small questions, these. It will take a whole season, forty days and forty nights, to investigate our responses and find our way to a cross and then a tomb that will shed new and transforming light on us. Light that seeks to so shine in our lives that we are brought to full, mature growth.

All for God's great glory and our great joy.

Will you pray with me? Loving God, within each of us is the place you have chosen to dwell. The light we carry belongs to you, because it is you. As we prepare for our entry into the Lenten season, as we live into the days we are given, enable us to acknowledge and affirm that light—no matter what we may have done or not done. Create in us the renewed willingness and the reinvigorated ability to let your light grow even greater in us, not for our sake but for yours and the world you so desperately love.

This we pray in Jesus' name. Amen.