



Sermon of February 14, 1999



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"UNTIL IT DAWNS ON YOU"

II Peter 1:16-21

Matthew 17:1-9

Lord Dunsany said, "It is seldom that the same man knows much of science, and about the things that were known before science."

That has been my experience, and I think there is a reason for it. You can blame it on the Darwinians, and their assumption that life is always evolving into higher, more complex forms, so that what is now is better and more sophisticated than what was before.

That was brought home to me when our children pointed out to me, "This is the 80s." They said that back in the decade in which they achieved independent enlightenment, and they assumed that the progression of time had made their father's ideas and tastes irrelevant. They said, "You are still living in the 50s." By which they meant, the only people interested in what I had to say

would be archaeologists.

We are trained to think that way in our society. We believe in evolutionary progress. In fact, many people believe that progress is inevitable, so that what comes later is just assumed as qualitatively better than what has gone before. So the past, one's heritage, is considered unimportant. "Seldom does the same person know much about science and the things that were known before science."

If that is true, then perhaps the greatest loss is that we no longer expect an epiphany. An epiphany is an event that transforms our lives so that we see the world and our own lives differently than we have before. An epiphany happens suddenly, unexpectedly, and inexplicably.

That is what John Newton was talking about in his famous hymn, "Amazing Grace," when he said, "I once was blind, but now I see." It happened suddenly, unexpectedly, and inexplicably.

You see the same phenomenon in the gospels. In all four gospels Jesus heals the blind. He often does it just after the disciples have done some dumb thing, or have failed to understand what he is trying to tell them. Jesus will then go from that scene to a blind man, who knows who Jesus is, and trusts him, even before Jesus heals him. Which means, he trusts Jesus before he can see, contrasting with those who have their sight intact, but do not believe. As Jesus says, "They have eyes, but they don't see." Thus revealing that seeing who Jesus is, what Jesus means to us, is an epiphany. It is a revelation. It is a gift of grace. It is an epiphany. It happens when grace transforms your life so that you can see now what you couldn't see before.

Spirit of the living God, fall afresh on me.

Melt me, mold me, fill me, use me.

Spirit of the living God, fall afresh on me.

That's the way it happens. Or, like this. Jesus said to Nicodemus, "You must be born from above." What he meant was, that the transformation of life comes to us as a gift, as a epiphany.

The Epiphany season comes to a close on this Sunday. Wednesday is Ash Wednesday, the beginning of Lent. The season of Epiphany is the season in which we look at those epiphanies that are recorded in the New Testament. Epiphany, as a season, begins thirteen days after Christmas. The lesson that is to be read on that day is the lesson of the visitation of the wise men to the manger at Bethlehem, who are led there by a star, an epiphany, something from above.

The second lesson in the season of Epiphany, read on the first Sunday, is the story of Jesus' baptism, where the Spirit descends upon Jesus as a dove, and a voice from heaven says, "You are my Son, in whom I am well pleased." That is an epiphany.

But the best epiphany is saved for the last Sunday of the season. It is called The Transfiguration, the lesson that was read to us today, when Jesus appears to his disciples the way he will be when he returns in glory.

The scene comes at the completion of the teaching ministry, the Galilean period of his life. It is a

critical time in the life of Jesus, and in the life of the disciples. We could call it a "stressful time." We can recreate the scene. Jesus was from Galilee, lived there all of his life. Galilee is in the north. Jerusalem is in the south. I imagine Palestine to be like California. Galilee in the north would be where the San Joaquin Valley is. Jerusalem would be down south, where Los Angeles is. It's a bad place, Jerusalem, as far as the Galileans were concerned. San Diego on this map, incidentally, would be the Garden of Eden.

Jerusalem, in our mind, is a holy city. We visit it as tourists, or on religious pilgrimages with our pastors. But in the minds of the Galileans in the first century, Jerusalem was the seat of power, oppressive power. It is where the absentee landlords lived, those who owned the land on which the Galileans farmed. They were tenant farmers, many of them. Jerusalem was the home of government bureaucrats who harassed them. Jerusalem was the garrison of the Roman army that occupied them. Jerusalem sent undercover agents to Galilee to keep tabs on things. Some of them came to Jesus when he was preaching, stood in the crowd, took notes that they would then send back to Jerusalem. Jerusalem was a bad place in the minds of the Galileans.

All the disciples were Galileans. They were happy there. Things were going well. Jesus increasingly popular. The crowds surrounding him getting larger and larger. Their association with Jesus gave them celebrity status. People recognized them. They even discovered that their association with Jesus meant that some of Jesus' power had rubbed off on them. They, too, were able to cure certain illnesses. They were happy in Galilee. They wanted this to continue. Besides, no Galilean would ever go to Jerusalem willingly, except for the high festivals, when they had to go to the Temple in Jerusalem.

But after three years, they are at Caesarea Philippi. Jesus says to them that they are going to Jerusalem, where he will be crucified, and die, and be resurrected. The disciples say, "No!" Peter especially protested. Peter said to Jesus, "You are out of your mind!" Jesus rebuked Peter, turned to him, and said, "You are possessed by the devil!" It was an ugly scene.

According to the text it was left like that for six days, this distance between Jesus and the disciples, especially Peter, the first disciple, the one who should know better. It was a stressful time.

Then on the seventh day Jesus said to Peter, James, and John, "Come with me apart." They went up on a mountain. Those of you who know the Bible, know that the writers tell these stories in such a way to remind you, when you read the story, of another story. The second story helps to interpret the first. So when anyone goes up a mountain in the Bible, especially in a stressful time, you immediately think of the first mountain climber in the Bible, Moses, who went up a mountain at that time when the Jews were complaining about having to wander around the desert, without any food, apparently lost, not knowing where they were going, complaining to Moses all the time.

So Moses, wondering why he had ever said "Yes" when God chose him to do this job, went up into the mountain, and there God appeared to him in an epiphany. When Moses came down his face shone, like a sunburn, because he had seen the glory of God. He got close to God. He came down with Ten Commandments, and the Jews rallied, their spirits renewed, and they went on in their journey.

Jesus went up a mountain, with Peter, James, and John, and there he prayed. And as he prayed, the disciples saw a great light, the kind that will give you a sunburn. It surrounded Jesus. That can mean only one thing: the presence of "glory." Glory is manifested as light. Glory is the signature of God. Glory is all that you can see of God. Looking at God is like looking at the sun. So it is in prayer that God comes to Jesus in glory. Peter and the other two disciples see this. Then, all of a sudden, there are Moses and Elijah, standing on either side of him. Then a voice says, "This is my Son, in whom I am well pleased; listen to him" As quickly as it appeared, it disappeared. Jesus is there, alone, praying.

That's an epiphany. That's the big one, the Transfiguration, because in that light, Jesus bathed in glory, they could see the way he will be at the end.

That epiphany is for the disciples, especially Peter, who doubted that Jesus knew what he was doing. "Listen to him," the voice says. It was like having their eyes and ears opened so that they could see and hear for the first time what was there all the time. Jesus is Lord. Jesus is the Son of God. That was true all the while, they just didn't see it. Now the voice says, "This is my Son."

Then Moses and Elijah, representing the Law and the Prophets. Moses brought the Law down from the mountain, so he represents the Law. Elijah is the first prophet, so he represents the Prophets. The Law and the Prophets. That is all the authority a Jew would need. They are there, on either side of Jesus, saying, "He is the one whom we have prepared you for."

Then that voice, the same one that was at the baptism, only at the baptism it was a private epiphany, only Jesus heard it, "You are my Son." But now it is public, an epiphany for the disciples. "This is my Son; listen to him." It is an epiphany. They saw what they hadn't seen before.

When they came down the mountain, Jesus said, "Don't tell anybody about this." Which is kind of like telling senators not to talk to reporters, because they told everybody evidently. It is in three of the four gospels.

It is also in the Second Letter of Peter. Did you notice that? In the epistle lesson read to us this morning, the Transfiguration is mentioned. It says, "We didn't make this up when we came to you and said, 'Jesus is Lord,' but we have been eyewitnesses to his majesty." It means that they were there at the Transfiguration. Listen to the whole text.

We were eyewitnesses of his majesty. When the voice was conveyed to him by the Majestic Glory, saying, "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased," we ourselves heard this voice come from heaven, for we were with him on this holy mountain.

The question that is being addressed in the Second Letter of Peter is the question of scriptural authority and of false teaching, which was rampant in the Church in those days. "Cleverly devised myths," that is what II Peter calls it. The author is saying, we speak to you with authority as those who have seen an epiphany, a transforming experience, that opened our eyes and enabled us to see the truth.

Then come these beautiful lines. Listen to this. This is addressed to 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.

You all know what the morning star is. At the dawn, when the sun begins to rise bringing a new day, the rays of the sun blank out all of the heavens except for one star that continues to shine. That's the morning star. In the early Church the morning star was one of the symbols of Jesus.

O Morning Star, how fair and bright
Thou beamest forth in truth and light,
O Sovereign meek and lowly!

Thou heavenly Brightness! Light divine!
O deep within my heart now shine,
And make thee there an altar!

"When the morning star arises in your hearts." "It is seldom that the same person knows much of science and about the things known before science." What a pity. What a deprived life. If you think that all that there is to know is a result of your data gathering, or your sense experience. What a shame.

People tell me from time to time, I don't believe the creeds. I don't understand the doctrines of the Church, so I don't pay any attention to them. They just dismiss them. They are not a part of their life. I tell them, the problem may not be that the doctrines are old and obscure. The problem may be that your life is too small, that you have not yet experienced what they are talking about. So, "you do well to be attentive to these things as a lamp shining in a darkness, until the day dawns," or until it dawns on you, "and the morning star," Jesus, "rises in your hearts."

He is talking about waiting for an epiphany. And he says it can still happen. Expect it to happen. Expect it to dawn on you. Expect to see the light.

Saint Peter argues that it is most likely to happen in scripture. The purpose of the letter is to get this church, whatever church it is, to take the authority of scripture seriously, and get rid of "cleverly devised myths," these fancy doctrines and teachings generated by our best feelings. Get rid of those things. It is only through scripture--we would say, mostly through scripture--that the light will dawn upon you. If you study scripture, if you live with it, scripture will be the source of an epiphany. In fact, Peter is suggesting that it is most likely for those of us in this period of history, the post-Resurrection era, most likely in reading scripture, that an epiphany will come.

It was like this. Kathleen Norris wrote a wonderful book called, *Dakota*. It is a book of meditation and devotion. People now take notice of her. In another writing she talked about her spiritual pilgrimage. She said she was raised in the Church. Then in young adulthood, like so many, she left the Church. Now, in middle age, she has come back to the Church through an experience that she had in a Benedictine monastery in Minnesota.

There she experienced the spiritual discipline of the monastic order called *lectio continuo*, which means, sitting and listening to the reading of scripture. It changed her life, she said. It was an epiphany. It came to her when she was listening to the reading of the Revelation to John. At the beginning of the Book of Revelation, John addresses the churches. He says to Ephesus, "God has this against you, that you have abandoned the love that you had at first."

Norris wrote this. "These are words of conversion, taking hold they can change a life. 'You have abandoned the love you had at first.' When I first heard them in the monk's choir, tears welled up in me, unexpected and unwelcome. I remembered how completely I had loved God and church as a child, and how easily I had drifted away as a young adult."

"You have abandoned the love you had at first."

She continued. "Somehow the simple magic of having the Bible read aloud to me opened my eyes to recognize the extent I had allowed the resistance of the world to shake my faith. A secular world view, terribly sophisticated, but of little use to me in the long run, had taken hold of me. Consequently I had allowed the fire to die down in my heart. In the Benedictine choir I allowed John's words to wash over me, and my full sense of the sacredness of the world returned, and I had begun to listen as a child again."

Isn't that wonderful. That happened while listening to scripture. We Methodists ought to know about that. We ought to remember John Wesley, sitting, listening to scripture, at a time in his life that was filled with conflict and stress and self doubt, just like the disciples. While listening to someone read from Luther's preface to St. Paul's Letter to the Romans, he said, "I felt my heart strangely warmed, and I knew that Jesus had forgiven my sins, even mine."

You will do well to be attentive [to scripture], as to a lamp shining in the darkness, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts.

*Help us to be masters of ourselves,
that we might be servants of others,
through Christ our Lord. Amen.*

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