

A Lamp Shining in a Dark Place
 II Peter 1:16-21; 3:8-13; Luke 9:28-36
 Transfiguration Sunday, (March 2) 2023
 Kyle Childress

Work and look hard for ways, for opportunities to make little moves against destructiveness.

- Andre Trocme

About 3 miles northeast of my boyhood home is a mountain. You can sit on the back porch and look due north to the water tower and grain elevators of Haskell, Texas, 18 miles away. But just over to the east only a few miles is what we grew up calling a mountain.

It's not a mountain by anyone's imagination who did not grow up on the rolling prairie ranchland of West Texas, where everything is flat. It's not really a hill – it is too rugged and sudden for a hill, and it's not tall enough to be much of anything except, maybe a butte, a bluff, a mesa. But it stands alone out on the ranch prairie, and therefore, we called it a mountain.

Luke tells us that Jesus takes Peter, James, and John with him up on a mountain to pray. Matthew says the same thing and Mark adds that it is a “high mountain.” So far, all of Jesus' ministry has been among the low hills of Galilee and the flatter coastal lands by the Sea of Galilee. We do not expect mountains. So abrupt and unexpected is this change of landscape, geographically, that it makes us wonder what's going on with Jesus to find a such a place and why do Matthew, Mark, and Luke make such a point of talking about a mountain?

But the Gospel writers are not interested in topography. Rather, the Transfiguration story is a summons to look at what is happening around us from a different angle of vision. The fact that we suddenly encounter a high mountain where we least expect one is crucial. Put simply, this abrupt appearance of a soaring mountain is an invitation to scale its heights with Peter, James, and John so that we too can see what we cannot see in the valley. Do not look for this mountain on a Bible map. This mountain juts out not from the topography of Galilee, but from the topography of God. This is the mountain of revelation, the mountain of transformed vision, the mountain of true seeing. This is an apocalyptic story – apocalypse, meaning unveiling. This is where we have a chance to see what’s real, what’s really going on.

What we see first, of course, is Jesus. The veil is pulled back, and suddenly Jesus dazzles us with a blinding light coming from inside of who he is. We also see luminous clothes, the cloud of divine protection and blessing, we see the Law and Prophets in Moses and Elijah, and we hear, “This is my Son, the beloved. Listen to him!” And what gets transfigured is not only Jesus but our perception of him. Our vision changes: we see Jesus for real.

Hang onto that thought, as we skip over to our other reading in II Peter, who keeps telling the receivers of this letter to not give up hope. He or she is speaking to a small community of believers hanging on by their fingernails. They are being persecuted by the Empire, they are worn out and worn down, sick and tired and sick and tired of being sick and tired. It seems that the Powers of Death and Darkness are on the rise and still, Christ has not returned.

Ridiculed, naysayers mock them, making fun of them and their beliefs, accusing them of trusting in false myths and fables. “Where is your God? You are

nothing but a bunch of liberal bleeding hearts and your days are over. You need to give up your hope!”

The II Peter writer counters these arguments and encourages that little bedraggled congregation saying, “We have not made up all of this. We were there on the holy mountain. We saw with our own eyes the majesty and glory of God in Christ” (1:16). In other words, “You trusted us. Don’t give up on that trust. We were witnesses of what we’ve told you about Jesus. You know us and we know you. Keep on trusting our testimony.”

When we’re in Christian community together, and over time, we learn to rely upon one another and learn that we can rely upon one another – that what we say and do is trustworthy. This is part of the basis of being the church and part of the basis of the testimony of Scripture. We trust the witnesses. And we trust the witnesses they trusted, and the ones trusted before that. They are imperfect, sinners, plain, and ordinary just like we are but we trust the Holy Spirit is at work in all of us across the centuries. The Living Light of Christ keeps shining.

There are times when we believe deep down in our hearts that God is at work. We believe it! Deeply! God is at work. But there are other times, maybe most of the time, when we’re not so sure. We struggle and sometimes, oftentimes, we doubt. We don’t know. We’re not sure. So, II Peter is reminding us, it’s about faith, not certainty. It’s about trust, not some inerrant, unassailable, objective ground of all knowing. Faith and trust. And faith and trust are communal practices, not individual. God is at work in and through each other, in community, so when our faith is thin and worn and frayed, we trust the faith of others around us and those who have gone before us, and we trust the faith of those witnesses who wrote their testimony down in what we call the Bible. We trust and pray for one another.

II Peter says don't give up. Don't give in. Keep hoping. Keep serving. Keep praying. Keep trusting. Stick to Scripture. Stay with the testimony of witnesses worthy of trust, because in dark times it might be the only light you're going to get. "It is a lamp shining in a dark place" he says (1:19).

One of the major themes of II Peter is the Light of the living God, Jesus Christ, invaded the world of darkness at Bethlehem in the Incarnation. The darkness of a world in turmoil, war, climate crisis, authoritarianism, and fear has tried and will continue to try to overcome the light but cannot (John 1:5). The Darkness tried to extinguish the Living Light on the Cross, but come Easter morning, the Living Light burst forth again. Remember we call it apocalyptic because apocalyptic means unveiling or revealing. We are beginning to see for real what's going on. The Powers of Darkness are being unmasked. And whether they know it or not, they are defeated in the Cross and Resurrection.

If up on the mountain, the disciples caught a glimpse of the Living Light of Jesus, that same light that the Powers of Darkness cannot overcome, there is even more apocalyptic good news: those disciples also saw themselves in and through that same Living Light. Down in the valleys and on the flat plains, they saw themselves exhausted and losing hope, walking on the edge of despair. But up on that mountain they could see themselves in Jesus' light. They could see their own baptismal garments dazzling like the sun, see the cloud of God's care hovering over them, hear God calling them "beloved."

And so it is for us. Sometimes nothing is more discouraging than ministry in the middle of the slough of despond, as John Bunyan put it. We try to speak a word for peace in a violent and angry and fear-filled world and get it thrown back in our faces. We try to promise hope in a society that mistrusts everyone and everything

that is not about power and control and working the angles. Down in the valley, it is often hard to see how ministry in Jesus' name can be sustained, and we look ahead and all we can see is privatizing everything including our public schools, and instead of protecting the weak against the bullies, we are siding with the bullies of the world.

On our own, by ourselves, we cannot sustain the light in such a world. Our little lamps run out of oil, and we feel ourselves slowly being overwhelmed by the darkness.

We all know we need to be turning up the wick on our lamps but our lamps are burning low. We all need to encourage one another by sharing the Light of the Living God with one another. And we find ways to share the Light in this town.

Andre Trocme, the pastor of the little church in the village of Le Chambon, France who sheltered Jews from the Nazis, encouraged his congregation: "Work and look hard for ways, for opportunities to make little moves against destructiveness."

Little moves against destructiveness. Providing a home for immigrants needing a safe place to live, feeding hungry people, encouraging beaten down people, writing letters, and, by the way, it looks like someone is going to need to teach and share practices of diversity, equity, and inclusion. These are lamps shining in dark places.

God has given us the Light of the Living Christ to shine in these dark places. Let it shine. Facing police beatings, torture by the Ku Klux Klan, and profound racism, hatred, and impoverishment by the Powers that Be, Fannie Lou Hammer consistently, defiantly sang "This little light of mine I'm going to let it shine." Our

calling is simply to let the Light of Christ shine through us.

Once more, Andre Trocme, said, “Those little oil lamps of Jesus’ time were not very bright. Still the difference between the total darkness of an unlighted house, and the light shed by a single lamp is the difference between night and day” (*Jesus and the Nonviolent Revolution*, p. 169).

Austin Heights, our lamps do not need to be big, and they don’t have to be bright. We do not need floodlights or stadium lights. All we need are small lamps burning with the Light of the Living Christ. Just a little hope shining in dark places.

In his memoir *A Dresser of Sycamore Trees*, lay Episcopal minister Garret Keizer describes a Holy Saturday vigil held in his tiny Vermont parish. When Keizer arrived at the church, he found that only two other people, a husband and wife, had come for the service. As the three of them huddled together in the old church, Keizer lit the Paschal candle and extinguished the other lights, a symbol of hearing God’s great promise of hope “in darkness, longing to hear it in the light of day.”

Together they prayed: “Grant that in this Paschal feast we may so burn with heavenly desires, that with pure minds we may attain to the festival of everlasting light.”

The Paschal candle sputtered in the dimness. As they prayed, the worshipers could hear cars passing by outside, travelers in a secular age oblivious to the ancient hopes being spoken in the little chapel. “There we are,” Keizer wrote, “three people and a flickering light.” This act of worship was, he said, “so

ambiguous because its terms are so extreme: the Lord is with us, or we are pathetic fools.”

That says it well. Either the Lord is with us, or we are pathetic fools. Down in the valley, with our faith overwhelmed by darkness, doubt and despair, our eyes can tell us only one thing: we are pathetic fools.

But up on the mountain there is another angle of vision. Up there, in the light of Christ, we can see for real.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. One True God, Mother of us all. Amen.

[Emily LeBlanc sings “This Little Light of Mine” a cappella.]