

**“As to a Lamp Shining in a Dark Place”**  
**Matthew 17:1-9; Exodus 24:12-18; II Peter 1:16-19**  
**Transfiguration Sunday**

**Exodus 24:12-18**

<sup>12</sup>The LORD said to Moses, “Come up to me on the mountain, and wait there; and I will give you the tablets of stone, with the law and the commandment, which I have written for their instruction.”

<sup>13</sup>So Moses set out with his assistant Joshua, and Moses went up into the mountain of God.

<sup>14</sup>To the elders he had said, “Wait here for us, until we come to you again; for Aaron and Hur are with you; whoever has a dispute may go to them.” <sup>15</sup>Then Moses went up on the mountain, and the cloud covered the mountain.

<sup>16</sup>The glory of the LORD settled on Mount Sinai, and the cloud covered it for six days; on the seventh day he called to Moses out of the cloud.

<sup>17</sup>Now the appearance of the glory of the LORD was like a devouring fire on the top of the mountain in the sight of the people of Israel. <sup>18</sup>Moses entered the cloud, and went up on the mountain. Moses was on the mountain for forty days and forty nights.

**TAIZE HYMN 842: The Lord Is My Light**

**Matthew 17:1-9**

<sup>1</sup>Jesus took with him Peter and James and his brother John and led them up a high mountain, by themselves.

<sup>2</sup>And he was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became dazzling white. <sup>3</sup>Suddenly there appeared to them Moses and Elijah, talking with him.

<sup>4</sup>Then Peter said to Jesus, “Lord, it is good for us to be here; if you wish, I will make three dwellings here, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.”

<sup>5</sup>While he was still speaking, suddenly a bright cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud a voice said, “This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!”

<sup>6</sup>When the disciples heard this, they fell to the ground and were overcome by fear.

<sup>7</sup>But Jesus came and touched them, saying, “Get up and do not be afraid.”

<sup>8</sup>And when they looked up, they saw no one except Jesus himself alone.

<sup>9</sup>As they were coming down the mountain, Jesus ordered them, “Tell no one about the vision until after the Son of Man has been raised from the dead.”

## **ANTHEM: “Humbly I Adore Thee”**

### **II Peter 1:16-19**

<sup>16</sup>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 had been eyewitnesses of his majesty. <sup>17</sup>For he received honor and glory from God the Father when that voice was conveyed to him by the Majestic Glory, saying, “This is my Son, my Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.” <sup>18</sup>We ourselves heard this voice come from heaven, while we were with him on the holy mountain.

<sup>19</sup>So we have the prophetic message more fully confirmed. 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.

### The Sermon

In August, 2010, a wildlife biologist and writer named Sam Keck Scott had already been at sea for two months, helping a non-governmental organization sail a 100-year-old ship from the Mediterranean Sea all the way to Southeast Asia.

Late one night, he witnessed an oceanic phenomenon, recorded a number of times over the centuries, but which very few humans have ever experienced for themselves—a phenomenon called “milky sea.”

“The sky was moonless and overcast,” he later wrote, “leaving no stars to steer by. Alone at the helm in the middle of the Arabian Sea, somewhere between Oman and India, I could see nothing in the ink-black night save for our ship’s dimly lit compass rolling on its gimbal mount as we heaved and swayed through [nine-foot] seas.

“But half an hour into my shift, the sails above me began to glow, as if the moon had risen. But there was no moon, nor any stars or other ships. The light, it seemed, was coming from below and growing in intensity. Soon the entire ocean was glow-stick green, but muted, as if the light were shining through a sea of milk.

“During the voyage,” he said, “I’d grown accustomed to the usual ‘sea sparkle’ caused by dinoflagellates that ignite when the water is agitated, causing ribbons of light to twist off the [ship’s] bow. But this was not that. This was the whole of the ocean, as far as I could see, glowing a uniform, opaque green. Despite the compass still wheeling in its mount, the light in the water created an optical illusion, making the sea appear perfectly calm, as if we were gliding through phosphorescent skies rather than roiling seas.

“I woke the rest of the crew, and for more than four hours we remained engulfed in this sea of green light, wonderstruck, with no idea what it was we were witnessing. Finally, a razor-sharp line appeared ahead of us where the lambent sea ended and blackness began. Crossing it, we left behind that numinous phantom world and reentered a familiar one, though we could still see the gauzy green glow to our stern for another hour

before it disappeared. It wasn't until we arrived at port 10 days later that we would learn the name for the eerie phenomenon that had surrounded us: a milky sea.”

(It has to do with a certain species of bacteria attaching to algae in the trillions and becoming bioluminescent—creating a glow that comes from within themselves—or, said better: they release a glowing light that their Creator has implanted within them, but it's only triggered when they know they have each other nearby.)

“For centuries,” Sam Scott learned, “sailors have been describing milky seas, rare occurrences when enormous expanses of the ocean light up uniformly at night, at times stretching for tens of thousands of square [miles].”<sup>i</sup>

When Peter, James and John—the inner circle of the inner circle of the disciples—went up the mountain with Jesus, there is no indication that they knew what they were about to see and experience for themselves.

The phenomenon had been recorded centuries earlier, but very few humans had ever seen it.

Jesus was transfigured before them, and then Moses and Elijah, both centuries in the grave at this point, appeared and were speaking with him, but apparently for the disciples it was like when a klieg light is shining in your face: not only are you temporarily blinded, but you kind of feel like you can't hear anything, either, as if there was some racket or static covering

up all other natural sounds. And the whole experience is disorienting enough that it makes it hard to think straight, too.

But maybe our Protestant need to feel like the most important thing is always and only that we're "thinking straight"—I wonder if maybe that's part of the problem here.

Scholars, and preachers (like me), and people of faith from all walks of life, have read and pondered this story for centuries, and usually, we're trying to find the logic of it, trying to nail down an explanation; and then to glean, or mine from it, some specific meaning that will then make sense of everything.

Which, in most ways, is great, but in some ways can veer hazardously close to idolatry—the idolatry of needing, or wanting, to have everything in God's universe, every holy mystery, "figured out," like a math problem.

Like Peter wanting to put boxes around Moses and Elijah and Jesus, we've even put it under the glass of assigning it a Sunday in the liturgical calendar, Transfiguration Sunday—the last Sunday before Ash Wednesday ushers in the long penitential season of Lent, when, as we take an unflinching, uncompromising look in the mirror, we're going to need the kind of encouragement that comes from somewhere beyond the realm of clear cut, mathematical answers.

The late-first-century writer of Second Peter, writing as if they were the Simon Peter who was there with Jesus on the mountaintop, puts the transfiguration in the context not of an

experience to unpack and sort out, but of a mystical encounter to give encouragement:

“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 had been eyewitnesses of his majesty.”

And we heard this voice conveyed to him by the Majestic Glory while we were with him on the holy mountain.

“So we have the prophetic message more fully confirmed.

“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.”

We don't have to be out on the ocean to feel like we are trying to pilot our way through a starless, lightless night, on choppy seas, alone at the wheel and with only a compass to guide us, whether that compass is our moral sense, or our trust in our own cleverness or hunches, or our faith in God's Word, or the memories of the people who taught it to us.

Sometimes, II Peter seems to be saying, the only compass you need to rely on is the same one from the beginning of John's gospel that summarizes the life, death, resurrection, and eternal reign of Jesus in 13 straightforward words: “A light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it” (John 1:5).

Even for those of us who live on the more privileged end of the spectrum, those solitary, starless nights can leave us feeling very alone, or very afraid, or very lost,

or feeling like that incomprehensibly vast and endless ocean beneath and around us is infested with sharks—sharks of self-destructive anger, or devastatingly immoral or amoral decisions, or overwhelming impulses to steer ourselves in catastrophic directions.

And when we humans find ourselves adrift in a lightless night, we are notoriously prone to compounding the darkness:

looking for escapist thrills in the wrong places, or with the wrong people, doing irreparable harm to ourselves, and our relationships, and other peoples' relationships;

or taking out our frustrations on the people closest to us—usually the ones we love the most and who are giving us the most of themselves;

or retreating into ourselves and ignoring the pain and hurt and injustice that affect human lives in ways we would rather not see too clearly, in case it might become obvious how much God holds us responsible for doing, knowing that, as Luke 12:48 puts it, “From everyone to whom much has been given, much will be required; and from the one to whom much has been entrusted, even more will be demanded.”

In the late 1500s, a brilliant young priest now known as Juan de la Cruz—John of the Cross—came under the wing of Teresa of



Avila, one of the great mystics in the history of the Church, and she brought him into the religious order called the Carmelites, to help her try to reform the order. Teresa of Avila believed that poverty was an important part of the program for all the Carmelites, and her specific sect came to be called the Discalced Carmelites—literally, the ones without shoes.

John of the Cross set up the first Carmelite monastery, but soon the traditional powers who didn't care for these innovations—especially the call to poverty—struck back, moving to shut down the Discalced Carmelites and kidnapping and imprisoning John.

They stuck him in a cell with no windows. Three times a week they let him out to eat one meal of bread and water, and then they'd beat him with a whip.<sup>ii</sup>

Eventually, he escaped, but not before he had written an 8-line poem called *The Dark Night of the Soul*.

But even in his literally tortured circumstances, the dark night to which he refers isn't the starless night of being lost and afraid and alone, crushed by circumstance and at the mercy of heartless cruelties intentionally inflicted.

The darkness John of the Cross writes about is a dark night that a prisoner of conscience might welcome if it meant escape—whether in the form of a literal jailbreak under cover of darkness, or a mystical experience of stealing away spiritually, into the night, to be close to Jesus—a giant leap in the lifetime's goal of complete union with God.

Sometimes darkness is more about the unknowable mysteries of God; the holy mystery that surrounds us, usually unseen as we make our way through life; the mysticism that connects us all.

We can't unravel or explain away every mystery in the life God gives us. Even the pathway to God remains obscure sometimes.

But we have our compass, the same one given to the disciples when they heard the Majestic Glory say, "This is my son, the beloved; listen to him."

Thomas Merton, the 20th century writer, scholar and Trappist Monk at Gethsemani Abbey in Kentucky, wrote:

"In the old days, on Easter night, the Russian peasants used to carry the blessed fire home from church. The light would scatter and travel in all directions through the darkness, and the desolation of the night would be pierced and dispelled as lamps came on in the windows of the farmhouses, one by one.

"Even so, the glory of God sleeps everywhere, ready to blaze out unexpectedly in created things.

"Even so, God's peace and God's order lie hidden in the world, even the world of today, ready to reestablish themselves in God's way and in God's own good time—but never without the instrumentality of free options made by free people."<sup>iii</sup>

In other words: God is the source of the light that shines through us, but it takes choices that we make for ourselves to make God's presence and majesty visible to the world.

Maria Popova recently wrote:

“The richest relationships are lifeboats, but they are also submarines that descend to the darkest and most disquieting places, to the unfathomed trenches of the soul where our deepest shames and foibles and vulnerabilities live, where we are less than we would like to be.

“Forgiveness is the alchemy by which the shame transforms into the honor and privilege of being invited into another's darkness and having them witness your own with the undimmed light of love, of sympathy, of nonjudgmental understanding.

“Forgiveness is the engine of buoyancy that keeps the submarine rising again and again toward the light, so that it may become a lifeboat once more.”<sup>iv</sup>

Even when we feel ourselves in darkness, it is still God's darkness.

Ever present somewhere in that darkness is the constant ability of God to bring enough light for us to see our way.

At the culmination of Queen Elizabeth's funeral day last year, at the ceremony of interment, a prayer was read as the family and the world said our last goodbye, which had been written four centuries earlier by John Donne.

“Bring us, O Lord God, at our last awakening,  
into the house and gate of heaven,  
to enter into that gate and dwell in that house,  
where there shall be no darkness nor dazzling,  
but one equal light;  
no noise nor silence, but one equal music;  
no fears nor hopes, but one equal possession;  
no ends nor beginnings, but one equal eternity;  
in the habitation of thy glory and dominion,  
world without end. Amen.”<sup>v</sup>

In the meantime, as we continue to make our way in life and in the world, may our eyes be open to the light that is not always visible to all, but is a signal to us at all times, in the bright daytime or the mysterious night, the prophetic message, more fully confirmed: that this One we have followed up the mountain is God’s son, the beloved.

We 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 our hearts.

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Montreat, NC  
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<sup>i</sup> <https://www.theatlantic.com/science/archive/2022/06/milky-seas-effect-ocean-bioluminescence/661384/>. Originally published in Hakai Magazine.

<sup>ii</sup> “Introduction” in St. John of the Cross, *Dark Night of the Soul* (Dover Thrift Editions: Religion; ed. T.N.R. Rogers, 2003), 6.

<sup>iii</sup> Thomas Merton, *The New Man* (Macmillan, 1999. Kindle Edition. Kindle Locations 2190-2215).

<sup>iv</sup> Maria Popova, <https://mailchi.mp/brainpickings/13-life-learnings-from-13-years-of-brain-pickings?e=4a9d53570b>

<sup>v</sup> John Donne (1572–1631)