

“Shining with the All-Stars”

Rev. Ken McGarry at The First Congregational Church in Stoneham, Massachusetts
February 27, 2022 – Transfiguration Sunday
Exodus 34:29-35; Luke 9:28-36

In both of today’s lessons from Exodus and Luke, we read of God’s light coming to people from the lofty mountaintops.

In the story of Exodus, the light came in the form of ten commandments given by God to Moses on the mountain that illuminated the path of the children of Israel as they wandered through the darkness of the wilderness below. The commandments gave Israel the light of direction and life. And as he carried down from the mountain the life-giving words of God, written on tablets of stone, Moses himself shined. Just by being in the presence of God, who is light, and carrying the words with which God shined light for people, Moses soaked up God’s light and glowed. His face shined so brightly from his encounters with God and God’s word, he had to cover it with a veil when in the presence of the people.

In our lesson from the gospel of Luke, we are told of another mountaintop experience in which God’s light shined. Jesus, while praying on a mountaintop with his disciples Peter, James, and John, was transfigured, becoming light. He did not just reflect the light of God, or glow from being in the presence of the Light; he himself was the Light shining gloriously on the mountain. And appearing on the mountain with him were two of the great reflectors of God’s light, Israel’s superstars, the great lawgiver Moses and the great prophet Elijah, who began to speak with Jesus about his departure, his movement down off of that bright, glorious mountain, into the dark wilderness below, and up to the even darker hilltop of Golgotha, where he soon would be raised up on a Roman cross.

Peter didn’t want the bright, glorious moment to end. He didn’t want to see any departure from the mountain, movement back into the valley, and certainly not Jesus being lifted up on a cross; and so, speaking before thinking, as he often did, he offered to pitch three tents on the mountain, so that the all-star team of Jesus, Moses, and Elijah could linger in light a little longer. But Peter, as he often did, missed the point entirely. God never intended for the light to be kept up on the mountain, but to be brought down from the mountain where the people

wandering in darkness needed it. And so in a spiritual slap upside the head, Peter was rebuked, as he often was, when the voice of God spoke: “This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!”

Jesus was the Light and spoke words that would give light to all who would listen. He came down from the mountain and shined in the valleys below, teaching all through his words and his example how to live in light. His most important lesson of all was given on the darkest day of all, when upon the cross, he showed us how to love, giving up his very life for the sake of others.

The world of Jesus’ day was world filled with people wandering in the dark wilderness, and the world was in need of his message that gave light and life. Today, the world is still in need of God’s light, for there is still much darkness around us. Some, individuals and nations, have risen to great pinnacles of power, and instead of using their power to shine light that blesses all below with illumination, they emanate darkness that cloaks all below with shadowy gloom. This week, we have witnessed the grim darkness of war cast upon 40 million people living in Ukraine, who did nothing to deserve being invaded by their more powerful neighbor. From the pinnacle of great power, the Russian president and the people and systems that support and are enriched by him have chosen to cast the darkness of death and destruction upon their neighbor, and they have indeed thrown darkness upon all of us around the world. Millions are suffering at this moment because some powerful people, in seeking to protect and grow their power and riches, have selfishly chosen the path of darkness.

And we witness too many other examples in our world of people in power choosing this path of causing harm to others. Too often, we glorify these people, erecting statues that valorize them and their legacy. I’m pretty OK with removing from pedestals of all kinds symbols glorifying those who have caused harm to others. We should lift up in their places examples of light, thus teaching our children the better way of love. For we are able to move from darkness to light, and to move our world from darkness to light, when we follow Christ’s path of love and we teach our children to do the same.

Moving from darkness to light is possible for us and for our world, and we only need to look at the many examples of this around us to realize that this is so. Just this week, in our own nation, which at its founding was a state in which many

millions of people suffered as slaves and were considered to be worth only three-fifths of a person, Ketanji Brown Jackson, who descended from slaves, was nominated to serve in a position of great power as a justice of the Supreme Court. It has taken generations of people struggling to move us from darkness towards the light of all people having equal opportunities for us to come to a day when a black woman, for the first time in our history, has been nominated to serve on the court, which has only had two black members and five women in its 232-year-long history. There is still much work to do for all people to have equal opportunities in our nation, but that we have come to this place is a sign that, through the persistent struggling of dedicated people, much light has shined on our darkness and that it is possible for societies to move towards becoming more just and filled with more light and life.

Let us be people who continue the struggle to move our society and our world to embracing Christ's bright way of love. Let us continue to gather together as we do each week to be reminded of our calling to carry Christ's light down off the mountain and into the darkened wilderness places where it needs to shine. When we find ourselves in those dark places, may the light of Christ shine brightly through us, that we may bring more of God's light and life to our needy world. Amen.