**Epiphany 3, Year A – January 26, 2020**

**St. Clement’s Anglican Church**

When I first read through the lectionary passages this morning, one verse in the second lesson stood out as particularly useful. Paul writes to the Corinthians saying “For Christ did not send me to baptize but to proclaim the gospel, and not with eloquent wisdom, so that the cross might be emptied of its power.” And I thought, that sounds to me like a pretty slick excuse for delivering a sermon that’s not quite up to snuff. Kind of like: “I WOULD love to have done a brilliant job, but I didn’t want to outshine Jesus.” At least, that’s how I read it, so thank you, Paul, for that – I’ll be sure to hang on to it for future use.

But on a second, more thoughtful reading through the passages, the words that stayed with me were the ones from Isaiah, the ones that are so dear and familiar to our hearts: “The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness – on them light has shined.”

These words carry a great spiritual meaning for Christians, even though they were not originally written to describe the coming of Christ. Isaiah wrote them in response to the troubled political situation and conflict of his time and his hope that the son born to King Azah would be the Davidic king who would work with God to fulfill God’s promise for peace and prosperity. But for thousands of years, since the earliest Christians, verses such as this have been understood to foretell the glory of the One who walked among us as a source of God’s true light.

This verse that tells of a great light shining on a people who walk in darkness resonates with us, I think, because in our personal spiritual journey many of us long to experience a true Epiphany. An all-consuming, unprecedented experience of the Divine. An experience that will uplift us as never before, and make us fully present in our relationship with God. An experience in which God becomes so real to us that any tendency to doubt God or drift away from God will be extinguished forever.

We sometimes measure our own spiritual experiences against other people’s glowing reports, and come up feeling wanting. We hear about a mountaintop epiphany that changed the course of someone’s life and can think only of those many days on which we feel spiritually dry and distracted, with seemingly no access to the living water we thirst for. What’s wrong with me, we wonder? God can’t be lacking, so obviously *I* must be doing something wrong.

But when I started thinking about this particular verse, I couldn’t help but reflect upon what it would be like to experience this situation literally. Imagine we are in darkness. It may not be comfortable, but the inky blackness is familiar and we have learned to accommodate it. But then in the blink of an eye that darkness is entirely dissipated by a cosmic spotlight that has targeted us from above. What would the effect be? Blinding. Painful. Confusing. Frightening. Destabilizing. Is that what our experience of God is meant to be?

Perhaps it is, at times. God certainly does not call us to a life of comfort and complacency. But there can also be dangers in lusting after such all-consuming experiences. People who are desperate for a glimpse of the light – especially those living in anguish, as described by Isaiah – can be vulnerable to a hope born of desperation. When you are suddenly led from darkness into light, you often can’t see clearly enough to identify the source of that light. Sometimes it’s a holy light. But sometimes we are blinded to the fact that it’s a false light; one that is very human in origin and cannot deliver what it seems to promise. There are all sorts of experiences that can give us the feeling that we have finally, this time, connected with the thing that is going to heal us and help us and elevate us. We can fall prey to cults of politics, of personality, of ideologies, of unhealthy forms of religion. What we might believe to be our mountaintop experience might end up leading us to very deep valleys.

Of course, some people do have genuine and extraordinary encounters with God. These are gifts that can move and inspire those of us who experience them or hear about them. But I would encourage you not to worry that you are missing out if you have never yet been visited by a great thunderclap.

For many of us, it is glimpses of the light that are ultimately more sustaining than one experience of a blinding light. Over Christmas I read for the first time C.S. Lewis’s spiritual autobiography *Surprised by Joy*. During his childhood and youth he had momentary transcendent experiences of what he called Joy, with a capital J. It didn’t happen often; it generally happened when he was rapturously engrossed in his imagination, such as when he was creating a miniature world in his garden or nursery, worlds such as he would later bring to life in his Narnia books. But in those few moments he would feel himself utterly at one with the universe. He didn’t, however, relate these experiences to God. As a child his religious life was practised rather by rote, and at boarding school he soon put it on the shelf. But gradually, in the course of his university life and under the influence of great Christian thinkers, God began to grow on him and, despite his earlier intellectual rejection of it, Christianity slowly began to make sense to him. I read the book, thinking it was leading to the retelling of a great Epiphany, the thunderclap moment that would turn C.S. Lewis into the brilliant, inspiring Christian writer and apologist that he was. But while there were important milestones and turning points in his journey, the one he relates as being the final step toward God took place on a bus, of all places, on Headington Hill in Oxford. He wrote:

Without words and (I think) almost without images, a fact about myself was somehow presented to me. I became aware that I was holding something at bay, or shutting something out…. I felt myself being, there and then, given a free choice. I could open the door or keep it shut; I could unbuckle the armour or keep it on….The choice appeared to be momentous but it was also strangely unemotional. I was moved by no desires or fears. In a sense I was not moved by anything. I chose to open, to unbuckle, to loosen the rein…. I felt as if I were a man of snow at long last beginning to melt. The melting was starting in my back—drip-drip and presently trickle-trickle. I rather disliked the feeling.[[1]](#footnote-1)

I tell you this because I think it is a powerful reminder that everything we need for a rich life with God is already inside us, waiting for us to truly embrace it at the core of our being. We don’t need awe-inspiring, supernatural experiences to confirm what we already know; in fact, perhaps our longing for or anticipation of those mountaintop moments is our way of putting off – consciously or otherwise – living out our Christian life with the full robustness it deserves. We need to accept what has already been offered; to experience conversion from within instead of waiting for a thunderclap from without.

An analogy for me is the longtime excitement of ordering a book from the publisher and knowing that as soon as I unwrap it my life will go from black and white to sparkling technicolour. And now in recent years, along comes Amazon Prime to capitalize on that anticipation; now I can order books in a frenzy on my iPhone at 2 a.m., lured by the thought that in only eight hours they can be in my hands and meeting all my heart’s desires. I can quite handily ignore the unread books piling up in my study, sure that it is the NEXT one that will make me smarter, wiser and whiter of teeth. But I know in my heart that my current library is brimming over with enough knowledge, entertainment and companionship to last me the rest of my life. My restlessness isn’t because the right book has yet to come; it is that I haven’t made the commitment to reading the ones I already have.

It is, of course, natural to long for moments of transcendence in our relationship with God. We want God to come to us looking like God. But God comes to us in ordinary clothing. God comes to us daily, disguised as the bits and pieces of our life. We shouldn’t be surprised the Holy Spirit speaks in the rough and ready language of humanity, because that’s the language we understand. For C.S. Lewis, his faith was built gradually, one conversation at a time, one book, one argument, one friendship, one bus ride. His eventual commitment to the Christian faith wasn’t experienced in a moment of ethereal bliss; rather, anticipating the demands that following Jesus would bring, he describes himself as “perhaps the most dejected and reluctant convert in all England;” a prodigal son who was “brought in kicking, struggling, resentful, and darting his eyes in every direction for a chance of escape.” There wasn’t any great burst of light; there was, as he explained, the somewhat uncomfortable feeling of snow trickling down his neck.

For most of us, conversion is not a one-shot deal but a continual making, breaking down and re-making of our understanding of God and what it is to be a member of the living Church. Throughout it all, we hope for a relationship with Christ that brightens the inevitable periods of darkness; a light that doesn’t blind us, but beckons us. We can focus on Christ as we would on a steadfast candle flame in a dark room, trusting that the darkness will never overcome Christ’s light, but understanding, too, that the light will never fully extinguish the darkness and difficulties of our very human lives. Expecting otherwise is to set ourselves up for disappointment.

But we can take great joy knowing the power of a single candle to light not just our way, but the path of the person beside us who may have lost theirs. And when we join our candles with those of countless others, the darkness of the world indeed meets its match.

So this Epiphany season, I invite you to open your hearts and minds to the love of God that is already within you. I invite you to embrace your faith, in all its imperfection, trusting that God wants to meet you more than halfway. Instead of looking wistfully out the window, waiting for Amazon to deliver the book that will change your life, may you know that the book is already written inside you, just waiting for you to crack the cover. And may you return to it, again and again, for it tells a story that is yours and God’s alone, and it is a story that wants desperately to be told.

*- The Rev. Peggy Trendell-Jensen*

1. Surprised by Joy, p. 179. Fontana Paperbacks, London. 1977 C.S. Lewis 1955. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)