

LIGHT OUT OF DARKNESS

MARK 9:2-9; 2 CORINTHIANS 4:3-6

LETHBRIDGE MENNONITE CHURCH

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I have been here at LMC for three and a half years now, which means that I have now reached that point in my preaching life where I *could*, theoretically, begin to reuse sermons. ☺

Many of you know that the lectionary follows a cycle of texts that repeats itself every three years. Which means that on Transfiguration Sunday of 2012,

But I won't do that. I know that most of you undoubtedly have locked each of my sermons into a vault in your minds and probably remember exactly what I said in February 2012!

But even in the unlikely event that you *don't*, I think that there are always new insights to be gained from old texts, new angles to explore, new treasures to draw out. The Bible has been preached on for a very long time, after all!

But the realization that I've been doing this preaching thing for over six years now did give me pause this week. It made me wonder about the sermon, about its value, it's role in the life and worship of the church.

It made me wonder about what people actually *want* in a sermon. It's easy to know what I want or expect from a sermon. And, for better or worse, you all get this each Sunday. ☺

But it's not as easy to know what things look and sound like from *your* perspective.

I hear comments, occasionally, about what resonated, what didn't, what questions I left unaddressed, which parts of the text I didn't I avoided, etc. But often I leave here on Sunday morning not really knowing much at all about whether or not the hours that I put into these twenty minutes on a Sunday morning were well spent.

So, I did the only rational thing that anyone in the twenty-first century could do when facing a question like this: I went online. ☺

Earlier this week, I conducted an online survey. I asked 430 of my closest (Facebook) friends what they wanted in a sermon. I had just come across another article written by a pastor in the States who had done something similar, so I decided to give it a try.

Here's a sampling of some of the responses that I received:

- I want a sermon that is very well crafted and tells a story that reveals some truth to me about the human condition and God's relationship with us... I am really tired of the Mennonite tendency to self-examine as a corrective to cheap grace--it's depressing--kind of the Debbie Downer of churches
- Telling me to forgive is really tiresome. I know that! But can you relate to me how hard--almost impossible it can be sometimes and what that feels like and how we can imagine God being present with us in that struggle--even admit that we just failed miserably but we are not alone?
- I think we need more honesty about how totally messed up we are and how we fail but also how beautiful we are and how loved we are by God.
- It's also OK to laugh at our ridiculousness. Laughing at ourselves doesn't mean we don't take discipleship seriously. It's just the best kind of grace.
- I want to hear what God wants to say to his congregation and hope my pastor is listening.
- I hate it when [confusing passages] are politely ignored. Sometimes they get read, and I think, "Oh good, someone is going to clear this one up for me", and then it gets jumped over. So disappointing. If you don't want to talk about, then just say, "I don't know what that verse means, or I don't want to talk about it. Anything. Just don't ignore it like it's not there while the whole time I am waiting for you to get to it.
- Don't underestimate your audience. We need to be challenged. Make us think. Tell us the original Greek word. Say what you really feel with no teaspoon of sugar to help it go down.
- I like a sermon to be biblical truth (I've heard pastors who preach a whole sermon without any reference to God's word). I appreciate when the hard issues are tackled in a loving, truthful manner, really provoking my thought process. Any sermon that is a catalyst to a change in my life, that gives greater understanding of, or a closer relationship with the Lord, is great in my mind.

And then, finally, some feedback from my number one son:

- Dad, your sermons are ok. But I think they could use a bit more comic relief.

I pulled a few common themes out of these comments.

Honesty. Scripturally-based. Tackling hard issues. Truth-telling—about God and about human beings. Humour.

And behind all of these, I think, lurks the one big thing that each of us want (or *should* want) from a sermon.

To see God. To hear from God. To encounter the God who stands behind and above and beyond all of the sermons, all of the songs, all the prayers, all the words that churches pour forth each Sunday.

Churches are awash with sermons about marriage and parenting advice or self-help techniques or pop-psychology, or therapy or countless other things that people imagine they are looking for when they are looking for God.

But we know that we can get this elsewhere. We don't need to go to church for this. And we know that people who stand where I am standing aren't often the most qualified to offer these things.

I know that each of us brings different assumptions and expectations to a sermon on Sunday morning, but I think all of us, even if only in a tiny way, hope to somehow *see God* in and his purposes for our lives when we come to this place and go to the trouble of listening to these weird things called sermons.

Our two texts today talk about seeing God.

Today is Transfiguration Sunday and in our gospel text, we see Jesus' miraculous appearance to Peter, James, and John on the mountain.

It is a holy moment.

Not only is Jesus' appearance transformed into one of brilliant whiteness, but they see Elijah and Moses—these heroes of the Jewish faith—right there beside him! And then, as if there senses weren't already overloaded, God himself speaks, declaring that this Jewish rabbi that they had been wandering around Palestine with was *divine*—the Son of God himself!

The moment is rich with biblical symbolism. Many scholars are of the opinion that Elijah and Moses represent the Prophets and the Law, thus linking Jesus to the story of Israel and of these two massive figures.

They symbolism goes even further. The dazzling whiteness points to Jesus' holiness and purity. The divine speech from the Father contains two short quotes from other parts of Israel's Scriptures.

- Psalm 2:7 (a Royal Psalm)
- Isaiah 42:1 which talks about the Suffering Servant who would be a light to the nations, who would establish justice, open blinded eyes, and set people free.

Together point to the truth that Jesus was a prophet unlike any other. The composite picture is of the fulfillment of Israel's hope—it's royal king, but also the servant who would suffer for their sake. It is a scene that demonstrates that God was speaking in an utterly unique and unprecedented way through him, that all of Israel's history to this point culminated in Jesus of Nazareth, and everything that would come after would be changed because of him.

Peter is so overwhelmed that he just blurts out the first thing that occurs to him—"let's build shelters." He wants to stay up there, to preserve the moment, to contain and capture it somehow.

It must have been quite a moment. The disciples *saw* Jesus in a way they had never seen him before.

Our second text this morning is from 2 Corinthians 4:3-6. Paul talks about how there are forces at work in this world that prevent us from seeing Jesus clearly and about how it is God himself who gives knowledge of himself.

Paul knows full well what he is talking about. Remember his experience on the road to Damascus (Acts 9)? Paul thought he understood very well who God was and what he wanted, and spent the first part of his life passionately defending "the truth" (as he saw it) and stamping out this Jesus movement that threatened the orthodoxy he had learned so well.

And then, Jesus blinded him so that he could see properly. In Acts 9 we read of how the Paul (who was actually *Saul* at the time) encounters the risen Christ in a flash of light and

truth on the road to Damascus. *Why are you persecuting me?* Jesus asks. Paul is led to Damascus where a man named Ananias is commissioned to lay hands upon him, to restore his sight, and to turn him loose as the God's "chosen instrument to proclaim my name to the Gentiles" (Acts 9: 15).

God gave Paul a clear vision of who Jesus was and he became the greatest evangelist the church has ever seen.

This is the man who was able to write the words from our text in 2 Corinthians this morning:

For God, who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of God's glory displayed in the face of Christ.

If my earlier "What do you want in a sermon?" survey is to be trusted, I should probably spend a bit of time on the more troubling aspects of this text.

What's all this talk about "the god of this world" blinding the eyes of the unbeliever so that they gospel is "veiled" to them?

If there are spiritual forces at work in the world that are hostile to God, and if it is these forces that are responsible for blinding the eyes of those who don't accept the gospel, then how are people responsible for the choices that they make? The devil made them do it, right?

Furthermore, if it is God who shone the light into our hearts to "give us the light of the knowledge of God," then are we who *do* accept the gospel just passive recipients of the good news?

Is Paul describing for us a world where both those who *refuse* Jesus and those who *accept* him only do so because they couldn't do otherwise, whether it was the "god of this world" who was doing the "blinding" or the one true God who was doing the "illuminating?"

Some Christians would say, "yes" to both. Some say that God picks those he will save and those he will allow to be blinded.

This is difficult, in my view, to square with the rest of Scripture.

We could pick any number of texts:

In Revelation 3:20, the risen Jesus says, “Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with that person, and they with me.” We are the ones who decide if we will open the door or not.

In Joshua 24, as the Israelites are assembled at Shechem, Joshua says, “But if serving the Lord seems undesirable to you, then choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your ancestors served beyond the Euphrates, or the gods of the Amorites, in whose land you are living. But as for me and my household, we will serve the Lord” (Joshua 24:14-15).

In Matthew 16:13-20, we see Jesus asking Peter, “Who do you say that I am?” Peter responds, “You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God.” And then Jesus says, “Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by flesh and blood, but by my Father in heaven.”

And here we see the theme that resounds throughout the narrative of Scripture.

Human choices are often described as participating in and being influenced by other forces as well. Peter decides who Jesus is, *and in so doing* demonstrates that he was receptive to God’s revelation, that he was aligning his will and his intellect with the Father in heaven.

The same is true, I think, for Paul in 2 Corinthians. Those who refuse to accept the gospel demonstrate that their own choices are participating in the reality of other anti-God forces at work in the world. Their choices lead to their being blinded.

It’s not *either* human decisions and choices *or* divine (or devilish) influence. It’s both. Our choices always taken place in the context of bigger forces that are at work in the world. We are always participants in either greater illumination or increasing blindness.

We are not quite as autonomous as we often like to believe. Our wills are acted upon by all kinds of forces, in this world and beyond. But we are also not passive pawns who are tossed to and fro by the whims of God and the devil.

I want to address one final question that some might have after hearing these two texts.

Maybe your concern isn't so much with how to understand the role of God and the devil in the context of human freedom. Maybe you're just wondering about why it can be so hard to see God sometimes? What about when the light in our hearts seems dim?

It's all fine and good for Peter and James and John and the Apostle Paul, who really *saw* God in ways that many of us can barely imagine.

But what about for the rest of us who don't physically see Jesus? What about the doubters, the skeptics, those who find it hard to believe? What about those who would *love* to see more than they do?

Are we blinded by the devil? Are we not receptive enough to God? Are we doing something wrong?

It is here that I think that we need to hear Paul's words at the end of our text today again.

For God, who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of God's glory displayed in the face of Christ.

The knowledge of God's glory is displayed in the face of Christ.

I had at least three conversations this week with people who were struggling with God. *How can I believe?* one of them asked, *when I have so many doubts? Why doesn't God make himself more obvious, easier to see?*

I want to close with the advice that I gave her:

When you find it hard to believe, hard to see God, why not ask yourself a few simple questions: What is a human life is for? What kind of a human being do I admire?

And then look at the person of Jesus—life, teaching, death, resurrection, the whole package. Look at his emphasis upon peacemaking, love (of friends and enemies), mercy, compassion, justice, simplicity... Look at him forgiving, even with his dying breath. Does this man and his way resonate with the deepest parts of who you are? Can you trust this One with the parts that don't (yet) understand, the things you can't yet see? Can you accept that he might have the ability to lead you into things that you don't yet understand? If not, then walk away. If so, then trust, and follow.

For me, Christianity is nothing more or less than accepting that God in Christ is reconciling the world (including me!) to himself, and that I am called to place my life in his hands,

Amen.

