

## Seeing the Light

It is a beautiful thing when the light goes on. Where once we were lost in the dark – not knowing which way to go or what to do – now we know; we know because we see; the light is on.

Darkness filled the Duquette household a few weeks ago. Our vacuum cleaner wasn't operating properly. This would not do. Given that Beanie, our 90 pound collie/golden retriever mix, is almost as gifted at shedding as he is at showing affection, vacuuming is a regular activity in our home. If we could not get it back in working condition, the fur would fly.

Janice had cleared the clog, but when we ran the vacuum it made a sound; not a good sound; not a sound a vacuum should make; a sound that said the job wasn't done. I was able to determine that a certain piece was loose; it was making the sound; and the way the piece was shaped suggested that it fit on the vacuum cleaner a certain way, but what was that certain way?

I tried this way; I tried that – to no avail; and then the light went on. Perhaps the piece did not fit on the inside of the vacuum cleaner; perhaps it fit on the outside of the vacuum cleaner! A satisfying snap later, and all was well.

It is a beautiful thing when the light goes on. Transfiguration Sunday celebrates that gift in the life of Peter, James, and John. Up on the mountaintop with Jesus, the glory of God is revealed to them; they see that Jesus is indeed divine as God says to them what God said at Jesus' baptism,

*Mark 9:7 (NRSV) <sup>7</sup> Then a cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud there came a voice, "This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!"*

We find ourselves this morning in the challenging position of offering testimony to someone else's experience; we're somewhere between eavesdroppers and eyewitnesses. We're uncomfortable talking about this, but is our silence veiling the gospel and keeping our neighbor from seeing the light?

### 1. Veiling the Gospel

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God is not proud. God is love. God is humble. Peter, James, and John have this incredible encounter with the living God; they hear the voice; they see the glory.

Why them? Why is this unique? Why didn't Jesus just show up at the Temple, shine the light, let the voice be heard, *Mark 9:7 (NRSV) ... "This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!"*

While we're at it, why doesn't God show up in our lives that way? Why doesn't God remove all the doubt and the fear? Why doesn't God answer all the questions and give us complete clarity? Why is it so hard sometimes to be a Christian?

God is not proud. God is love, and God longs for us to love him in return. Love cannot be coerced; it cannot be compelled. God gives us love freely and hopes that we will love him freely in return.

Humility often keeps us silent about the difference Jesus is making in our lives. We don't want to preach (heaven forbid!) and we certainly don't want to present ourselves as being better than anyone else or "holier than thou."



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Chances are we've had an encounter over the years with a fellow believer who doesn't share our qualms. They know the answer. They have no questions, and they are "holier than thou" so thou hadst best get thine act together!!

Paul will speak to this in a moment, but in this uncomfortable, veiled, "in the cloud" place between certainty and doubt, question and answer, we Presbyterians can shine, because we proclaim a God who is greater than our understanding. We can endure the uncomfortable silences. We can abide with unanswered and possibly unanswerable questions. We can live with doubts and uncertainty, because we trust in God. We trust that the limits of our understanding do not limit or define God.

We can shine because we offer a way to be a Christian, a believer in Jesus Christ, without leaving our minds at the door. We can shine because we can welcome the ones who want to encounter the risen Christ without having to adopt a host of official policies or tell the lie that they have it all together. We can shine because we can admit that we are beggars and we can invite our fellow beggars to join us where we've found bread.

We can shine, but will we? Will we let our voice be heard, or will we hide behind the veil and surrender the gospel to those who know the answers, ask no questions, and demean doubt as a lack of faith? Will we let our voice be heard, or will we veil the gospel?

### 2. Seeing the Light

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*2 Corinthians 4:5-6 (NRSV)*

*<sup>5</sup> For we do not proclaim ourselves; we proclaim Jesus Christ as Lord and ourselves as your slaves for Jesus' sake. <sup>6</sup> For it is the God who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.*

When did you see the light?

I wonder if we are selling ourselves short. I wonder if we diminish our experience of God saying in our lives, "*Let light shine out of darkness,*" such that we feel we have nothing to say. Somewhere along the way, we bought into a cookie cutter model of religious experience such that if our encounter with God didn't meet certain criteria, then it's not legitimate.

Here's a thumbnail sketch of what a genuine encounter is like (and I offer this not as a litmus test but to counter the litmus tests that are already out there): 1. A profound sense of humility – what we are experiencing is a gift that we don't deserve and have not earned. 2. A deep, deep sense of being loved and valued and cherished – we're not worthy and yet we've been declared worthy. 3. A setting aside of our anxiety and fear – we are at peace. We still have questions. We still have doubts, but in this moment; and somehow, we're able to be fully in this moment; we are at peace.

When did you see the light? Notice, the question is not, "did you see the light?" But "when did you see the light?"

2 Corinthians 4:3-6; Mark 9:2-9



If you think your story is inadequate and unworthy, your light isn't bright enough; you're off to a good start. Consider the following story of conversion written by Anne Lamott in her autobiography *Traveling Mercies*:

She was going through a very tough time in her life, addicted to cocaine and alcohol and just having had an abortion of a child conceived in an affair with a married man. In the week after the abortion, she took to bed with alcohol and pain medication. She writes (p. 49-50):

“After a while, as I lay there, I became aware of someone with me, hunkered down in the corner, and I just assumed it was my father, whose presence I had felt over the years when I was frightened and alone. The feeling was so strong that I actually turned on the light for a moment to make sure no one was there—of course, there wasn't. But after a while, in the dark again, I knew beyond any doubt that it was Jesus. I felt him as surely as I feel my dog lying nearby as I write this.

And I was appalled. I thought about my life and my brilliant hilarious progressive friends, I thought about what everyone would think of me if I became a Christian, and it seemed an utterly impossible thing that simply could not be allowed to happen. I turned to the wall and said out loud, “I would rather die.”

I felt him just sitting there on his haunches in the corner of my sleeping loft, watching me with patience and love, and I squinched my eyes shut, but that didn't help because that's not what I was seeing him with.

Finally I fell asleep, and in the morning, he was gone.

This experience spooked me badly, but I thought it was just an apparition, born of fear and self-loathing and booze and loss of blood. But then everywhere I went, I had the feeling that a little cat was following me, wanting me to reach down and pick it up, wanting me to open the door and let it in. But I knew what would happen: you let a cat in one time, give it a little milk, and then it stays forever. So I tried to keep one step ahead of it, slamming my houseboat door when I entered or left.

And one week later, when I went back to church, I was so hungover that I couldn't stand up for the songs, and this time I stayed for the sermon, which I just thought was so ridiculous, like



someone trying to convince me of the existence of extraterrestrials, but the last song was so deep and raw and pure that I could not escape. It was as if the people were singing in between the notes, weeping and joyful at the same time, and I felt like their voices or something was rocking me in its bosom, holding me like a scared kid, and I opened up to that feeling—and it washed over me.

[After going to church that weekend]... I began to cry and left before the benediction, and I raced home and felt the little cat running at my heels, and I walked down the dock past dozens of potted flowers, under a sky as blue as one of God's own dreams, and I opened the door to my houseboat, and I stood there a minute, and then I hung my head and said 'F— it: I quit.' I took a long deep breath and said out loud, 'All right. You can come in.'

So this was my beautiful moment of conversion."<sup>1</sup>

*2 Corinthians 4:5–6 (NRSV)*

<sup>5</sup> For we do not proclaim ourselves; we proclaim Jesus Christ as Lord and ourselves as your slaves for Jesus' sake. <sup>6</sup> For it is the God who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.

It is a beautiful thing when the light goes on. Shine through the veil; speak up; speak out! Tell your story! Let God's light shine through you! Your words, your story may be the means by which a humble God parts the veil. Your words, your story may be the good news that someone very much like you can hear, and in the hearing, they can dare to believe that they are seeing the light. Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> Read more: <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/blackwhiteandgray/2011/12/a-favorite-conversion-story/#ixzz3RmKBrdun>

