

important, life-giving truths about our God, come to earth in Christ. Jesus came to be fully human and out of the depths of love, he endured the worst of human life and death. We may only fully see that in the darkness.

A Christian Cappadocian monk named Gregory of Nyssa wrote a thousand years ago about how God is revealed in darkness. He reflected on that story of Moses encountering God on the mountain. There too, a holy cloud overshadowed God's servant, and made everything fuzzy; it obscured the light. Gregory wrote that we, too, might find that our vision goes dark and everything is fuzzed over with clouds when we approach the full splendor of God. Rather than the clarity we imagine, he thought that "if we decide to keep going beyond the point where our eyes or minds are any help to us, we may finally arrive at the pinnacle of the spiritual journey toward God, which exists in complete and dazzling darkness."<sup>2</sup> God absolutely does exist in the light; but not only in the light. Some of the most vital encounters with God take place in the darkness. Some of things we must know and experience about Christ are much clearer in the shadows than in the brightness of the light.

That probably isn't what you expected to hear about this story today. Transfiguration is all about the light, so why are we talking about darkness? That's what happens when we push on binaries and press on concepts that are 'supposedly' opposed to each other. We end up surprised! We begin to see how the ideas are sometimes more alike than their differences would have us suspect.

So go out and look for the light. I know how much we are yearning for it, especially in these days. Look for the light in the world and in your own life. Look for light shining in joy and wonder. See all that it reveals about how Christ is present and how good God's goodness is. Let that vision overwhelm you with awe. But at the same time, trust that other truths about God are also revealed in the shadows; in times that aren't so glorious. Assume that in times of darkness God is still there, fully present. Perhaps showing you something new, revealing something that you can discover there about how love is revealed in sorrow; or how grace is made known in suffering. Do not despair when the darkness descends. Trust that God's presence is there with us in the valleys. Like in the story, where Jesus was fully present amid the illness and misunderstanding, with a faithless and perverse generation. Jesus was there, and is there, revealing to us a holy God whose love can never be eclipsed by too much light or too thick a darkness.

All glory and honor, thanks and praise be to God.

1 <https://www.eyemichigan.com/why-can-i-see-better-when-i-squint-my-eyes/>

2 Qtd. in Barbara Brown Taylor, *Learning to Walk in the Dark* (New York: Harper Collins, 2014), 48.

March 2, 2025  
Transfiguration Sunday  
*"Darkness and Light"*  
Rev. Emma Nickel  
Scripture: Luke 9:28-45

The brightness of God's glory revealed Jesus's identity up on that mountain. The Transfiguration was a critical moment in understanding Jesus. His changed appearance celebrated and highlighted his connection with the Creator God, filled with goodness and divinity. The voice in the cloud made Jesus' authority clear. The result of the encounter was like so many Biblical encounters with angels or the very presence of God: people were left wondering, startled, and dazzled by the holy light.

This time of year, we yearn for light, both real and metaphorical. Light feels healing and warm; it shows us more than we can currently see; it reminds us that Christ is present. Yet it is the interplay of light and dark that actually helps reveal what is in front of us. See, the brightness of the light didn't tell the disciples everything about Jesus. As much as bright light can reveal, it can also obscure. When the eye doctor passes that mirror in front of my eye and shines a beam of searing white light into my pupils, I know it helps them check the health of my eye. But the result of that light is so bright it makes me see stars and I just want it to go away. Or in the summer when I'm driving on the highway on a bright, sunny day and up ahead there's a slowdown. When I get to the front of it, I realize the only explanation for it is that people are slowing down because they can't see; the sun is too bright. Peter, James, and John walked away having realized Jesus' divinity and his relation to God. But there were other truths that even the light did not reveal. There was more to be disclosed that they had to learn some other way.

This theme of divine light so bright it both illumines and distorts has connections to other Bible stories. Way back when Moses was leading the people, he went up a mountain and encountered the very presence of God. When he returned, Moses had to veil his face because his skin glowed too intensely from being in the presence of the holy one. Similarly the light that shone in Jesus established for the disciples, and for us, his divinity. Jesus was not just a rabbi; not just a healer or a preacher. He was God, walking

on earth. If the glowing skin wasn't enough, then the voice from the cloud surely made this fact clear. The voice spoke to the disciples, saying "This is my son, my chosen. Listen to him!" A few chapters earlier in Luke, at his baptism, a similar voice from the heavens called out to Jesus himself, saying "You are my son, the beloved. With you, I am well pleased." This interplay among so many stories in the Bible means that we cannot see Jesus, his life and teaching, apart from the rest of scripture. There is a through line between the start of God's story all the way to Jesus, and of course, to the church after that.

There's one other important scriptural connection, too. Luke tells us that Moses and Elijah were speaking about Jesus' *exodus*. The basic definition of the word *exodus* means 'departure.' It meant that soon, Jesus would depart this life through his arrest and death; another kind of *exodus*. But that word has obvious roots in the Hebrew people's dramatic escape from enslavement in Egypt, what we call *The Exodus*. Luke wanted his readers to think about this echo of that Exodus in the life of Jesus. He wanted us to remember the freedom from slavery in the Hebrews' *exodus* and the protection that God offered in the Passover. Jesus' *exodus* will similarly bring freedom and safety through the cross and resurrection: tangible demonstrations of God's ultimate love. But the disciples were taken in by the light and the wonder, not by the worries of what was to come for Jesus. Peter's confused comments about building tents to perhaps stay in this moment of ecstasy show us that they weren't getting the full picture. Even this amazing light wasn't preparing them for Jesus' coming departure from his earthly life.

Even though the disciples were confused, Luke wanted us to see and hear all these truths together: Jesus as God among us, filled with power, might and glory. And, at the same time, Jesus' coming betrayal and crucifixion. The words that surround this awesome event help us take all that in, from the mention of Jesus' *exodus* to the events at the bottom of the mountain. There, when the glowing had stopped and they were back to the everyday, Jesus let his real feelings come out. He was frustrated with the people around him, maybe the disciples, maybe the crowds, maybe both. But even in that moment of human emotion, Jesus still healed the boy who was suffering. He still showed and embodied the greatness of God. Then, in the closing verse of this passage, Jesus said it plain and clear: I'm going to be betrayed into the hands of human authorities. Even though he had told the disciples before about his coming death and resurrection, and even though he would say it again, they still struggled to understand. They could not hold this amazing image of him up on the mountain together with the image of their leader going to his death. It made no sense. What the light revealed about Jesus'

holy nature, it might also have gotten in the way of their understanding of his coming crucifixion.

In the season of Lent begins on Wednesday, we're going to explore some of the tensions in our faith and about Jesus himself. These are binaries that seem to be opposed to each other, but are actually much more bound up together. Things like the notion of enemies and neighbors, who might actually not be so different. Or periods of rest that are actually all about growth. Or how Jesus' own power and humility might be one and the same. We see the same tension in this passage about Jesus' transfiguration. He glowed with divine glory. And yet all the other parts of the story point out his humanness; his coming passion, which meant his suffering and death. So how should we think about that wondrous light that surrounded Jesus? What does it show us, and what does it hide?

A helpful article on an eye doctor's website, invites us to think about light and the way our eyes see like this: "Most people think that you would see better when your eyes are open wider. This sounds logical. Your eye is getting a broader view of the world, and more light is accessible to produce a clearer image. However, in practice, many people find that the opposite is true. When we squint, we can often see things a little clearer."<sup>1</sup> This happens because the lens of the eye changes shape when we squint. It makes small adjustments to allow us to focus better, kind of like a camera. And when less light enters the eye, it changes the impact on our retina and makes whatever we're looking at appear sharper.

Most of us have probably experienced this. Sometimes, when my glasses are off and my contacts aren't in, I'll glance at a clock across the room. And without those things, I can't see it for anything. But if I make a tiny hole to look through with my thumb and forefinger, somehow reducing the light and changing the space I'm looking through, I can make out the numbers just fine. And I'm amazed by what feels like a magic trick, though it's really just science. This is how cameras work, too, when they change the aperture. The aperture is the opening in a lens through which light passes through to the camera. Changing the aperture changes the depth of field, which depending on the change, can either make things look sharper or more blurry. Usually, the smaller the aperture and the less light you let in, the sharper the focus. Which seems counter intuitive to me. How funny that to see clearly, we need less light and a smaller space to look through.

Now it's not that the light of Transfiguration showed nothing of Jesus. It showed so much: his holiness, his divinity, and the wonder of God's goodness. But all that light didn't show everything. Other aspects of Jesus' mission and ministry were better revealed in the shadows. Which is a reminder that the shadows and darkness are not necessarily bad. They, too, reveal honest,