

## ONE TRUE LIGHT

The Last Sunday after the Epiphany

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Today we come to the end of the Sundays after Epiphany, during which we have had a journey through the stories of the early days of Jesus' adult life and ministry through the lens of Mark's Gospel. We have noted throughout these weeks that Mark's is the oldest of the Gospels, and always gives us an up close and immediate view of things. We feel like spectators ourselves, as we feel the thrill and amazement of being in Jesus' presence and witnessing his acts of power.

Today, what we are witnessing up close is something different than we have seen so far, though. We often think of Mark's Jesus as the most human Jesus we find in the Gospels, and we are not wrong. He is usually very different from John's very elevated Jesus, who often seems remote and removed from ordinary life. But in today's text – Mark's account of the Transfiguration – we are reminded that, even in Mark, there is no question of the cosmic dimension of who Jesus is. Notice that in this scene, Jesus says nothing. "It is a disclosure about him," as one commentator rightly says. (Darrell Bock, *Mark*, p. 248).

Jesus is transfigured before Peter, James, and John in "dazzling white," clearly revealed once and for all as God's Son. Peter – who Church tradition tells us was Mark's main source for his Gospel – suggests that "three dwellings" be made, one for each of the three holy men. (Mark 9:5) Many sermons have been preached – including by me – in which Peter's suggestion is seen as another example of his bumbling, his need just to say something. But Peter's suggestion of making booths is not as far out or simply nervous as it might seem when studied in context. Building dwellings is a reference to the Feast of Tabernacles, and "the hope that in the new day God would tabernacle with his people again." (Bock, p. 250) What is corrected by the voice from heaven is not the suggestion of building dwellings, but Peter's giving the three figures the same status. Only Jesus is glorified here: "*This* is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!" (Mark 9:7) Peter was missing the uniqueness of Jesus, a uniqueness that existed even by comparison with Elijah and Moses.

Are there ways that we make the same mistake?

Listen to Paul, in today's Epistle: "And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing. In their case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God." (2 Cor. 4:3-4) Paul is clearly using language that refers directly to the Transfiguration here. He is reminding his hearers that it is possible to miss the dazzling light of the gospel just as Peter missed the dazzling light surrounding Jesus *only* when "the god of this world" blinds their minds.

What searing words these are: that our minds might be blinded by the god of this world and kept from seeing Jesus for who he is. What could have this effect in our lives today? What god of this world could blind our minds from seeing the truth?

There are surely many answers; but one that stands out is the god of privilege, and often specifically white privilege. Affluent communities are largely sheltered from the staggering suffering in black and brown communities during the pandemic. A quick Google search reveals dozens of examples. Here are a few: U.S. blacks are 3 times more likely than whites to get COVID-19 (CIDRAP, University of Minnesota); Black Americans are 37% more likely to die than Whites; Asians are 53% more likely to die; Native Americans and Alaskan Natives, 26%; Latinos, 16% (*Washington Post*, 11/20/20); the toll among California's migrant workers, harvesting the food we enjoy, is staggering,

particularly since their undocumented status often prevents them from gaining access to health care of any kind (*USA Today*, 9/3/20). These examples could go on for the rest of our service this morning and much longer.

Sin is very often a matter of failing to see clearly or correctly. The word most often used for sin in the New Testament is *hamartia*, an archery term meaning “missing the mark.” When we are blinded by our own privilege, we fail to see the truth of the human suffering that literally surrounds us and, indeed, lives among us and serves us. We fail to see that our comfort, our full stomachs, our warm, dry homes, are enjoyed on the backs of many who are suffering. And in our blindness, we literally live in sin.

The teaching of the Church is that Jesus saves us from sin. We are saved from sin when his dazzling light directs us to see the suffering around us and to resolve to take the focus off our own well-being and direct our energies and abilities towards the alleviation of suffering and the delivery of justice and fairness. If we listen to him, he will guide us in our efforts, and we will feel his pleasure. We will be able to say, with Paul, “... 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.” (2 Cor. 4:6)

May this light illumine our hearts and minds always. And may we not rest until the work of justice and fairness are done.