

Last Epiphany, Year B

2 Kings 2:1-12

Psalm 50:1-6

2 Corinthians 4:3-6

Mark 9:2-9

There's a United Church of Christ pastor
named Shawnthea Monroe
who tells the story
of taking a group of inner-city kids
on a wilderness canoe trip
in northern Minnesota.

She says that on the first night,
when the sun had finally set
and everything was dark,
the stars burst into view
and filled the night sky.

One young woman who was with her
looked up and asked,
"Where did *those* come from?"

Pastor Monroe had to explain that
"the stars were always there,
but in the city, there [is] too much light pollution
to see any but the brightest."¹

It seems that, until that night,
that young woman
never knew the glory
that had always surrounded her
because all our human-made light
had long obscured her view.

* * *

Unfortunately, this is the way of things.
This is how it is,
far beyond the issue
of starlight and cityscapes.

¹ Monroe-Mueller, Shawnthia. "2 Corinthians 4:3-6, Pastoral Perspective." *Feasting on the Word: Year B, Vol. 1*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008. 446-448.

You and I are surrounded by the glory of God,
and I don't mean in some boring way
like when modern-day mystics say,
"God is in the dirty dishes;
God is in the mundane;
God is in the everyday stuff of life;
you just have to look for him."

I mean, all that's true,
but the glory of God envelopes us
in a *big* way, too.

We are *surrounded* by the glory of God.
God is all around us.
God is all inside us.
God is the thing we breathe.
God is the life we live.
Like fish swimming in the water,
you and I are swimming in the glory of God
every day.

And yet,
when was the last time you
felt that,
believed that,
remembered that?

When was the last time you *knew*
that you were living,
and breathing,
and basking
in the glory of God?

(You're doing it right now, by the way
whether you know it or not.)

If we're being honest,
when it comes to the glory of God,
for most of us—
even those of us who try to seek it out—
it always feels like there's
something in the way . . .
something in between . . .
something obscuring the view.

* * *

Nobody understood this better than the Apostle Paul, and it's a large part of what he's talking about today when he says in 2 Corinthians that to some, our gospel is veiled.

“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

Here's the thing. Typically, Paul spends *paragraphs* talking about how the gospel of God, the goodness of God, the glory of God *is not hard to find*.

God is *not* some big secret.
God is *not* far away.
God does *not* require a special password or a secret handshake.

If you want to see the glory of God, Paul says, *then look at Jesus*. Everything you need to know was laid bare in and by the Son of God.

And yet, today Paul admits that to some, the glory of God—even in Jesus—is veiled.

There's something in the way . . . something in between . . . something obscuring the view.

² 2 Corinthians 4:3-4

What is it?

Well, in his own words,
he says that
“the god of this world—
[lower case g]—
has blinded the minds
of the unbelievers.”

Now, you could read this
in one of two overly simplistic ways.

One, you could mistake
lower case g “god” for
upper case G “God”
and assume he means that
God is blinding certain people
from the gospel.
He is not.

You could also read this sentence
and find yourself saying,
“Yup, he’s talkin’ ‘bout the devil.
It’s the devil that blinds the unbelievers
and keeps ‘em from seein’ the glory of God.”

And maybe that’s true.

But folks,
we don’t even have to
get into the topic of “unbelievers”
because—let’s face it—
even for those of us who do believe,
there’s usually something in the way . . .
something in between . . .
something obscuring the view.

If you ask me,
the “god of this world”
that Paul talks about
is not the devil;
it’s not the demons;
it’s not the darkness.

It’s us.

**The reason we don't see
the glory of God all around us
is because we are too often standing
in the light pollution
of our own souls.**

Now you can take that to mean
a lot of different things,
but for most of us these days,
it has to do with all the stories we tell ourselves
about how we can “live our best life,”
about how we can work to improve ourselves,
and about how great things will be
“if we can just . . .”

If I can just lose the weight . . .
If I can just increase my income . . .
If I can just restore my marriage . . .
If I can just clean out the garage . . .
If I can just kick the habit . . .
If I can just work up the courage . . .
If I can just speed things up . . .
If I can just slow things down . . .
If I can just find a better job . . .
If I can just make a better plan . . .
If I can just learn to say “no” . . .
If I can just get past my fears . . .
If I can just make it ‘til the surgery . . .
If I can just . . . live . . . my best . . . life . . .

But y'all know as well as I do
that there's a problem with *all* of that.
It's a sham.
Even when we can manage
to do *half* of those things,
it still puts *us* at the center of the world.

As Pastor Monroe says,
“It's hard to see the glory of God
when you are standing in the spotlight.”³

* * *

But while all of that is true,
there's still good news.

³ Monroe-Mueller. 448

Here's the grace for us today:

*There is an antidote
to our own self-glory.*

*There is an inoculation
against the light pollution
of our own souls.*

When Paul says that
if you want to see
the glory of God,
all you have to do
is look at Jesus,
he doesn't mean
the baby Jesus,
the rabbi Jesus,
the teacher Jesus,
the healer Jesus.

*He means
the crucified Jesus.*

**There is a foolproof way
to see the glory of God.
It is by looking to the Cross,
where God gave up his glory
that he might rescue us from ours.**

Even when Jesus was transfigured
on that holy mountain
and unmistakably drenched
with the glory of God,
it was only so the disciples
would understand after the fact
exactly who it was
who went to the Cross
and emptied himself for all.

The transfiguration today
means nothing without the Cross
in the days to come.

* * *

And so, to the Cross we go.

As you may be aware,
the season after Epiphany
is almost over.
Lent is almost here.
It begins this week
on Ash Wednesday.

As I do every year,
I will implore you
to make the season of Lent
a holy one.

For God's sake,
don't try to turn it into
a time of self-improvement.
Lent is not New Year's Resolutions 2.0.
Lent is not a time of "if-I-could-justs."
Lent is not about *your* glory.

Plain and simple,
Lent is about seeking after
the humble glory of God
made known to us
in the crucified Christ.

So, as Jesus and the disciples
now come down the mountain
and set their faces toward Jerusalem,
and as we prepare to follow behind them,
I'll end with a question and an invitation:

Do you want to see the glory of God?
Are you ready to see the stars?
Are you tired of the light pollution
of your own ego, your own fears,
your own shaky attempts at self-realization?

Then come on.

Let's lay ourselves aside.
Let's walk the way of the Cross.
Let's behold the glory of God.

Amen.