

**Sermon: Illuminations****Scripture: Matthew 17:1-19****Preacher: Rev. Will Burhans****Date: February 19, 2023**

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A poet friend of ours up in Vermont, Kate Maynard, taught me in a piece that she wrote for her church, that... we glow. Did you know that, that we glimmer? A study in Japan back in 2009 found that people are actually bioluminescent, we give off light though it's too dim for us to actually see and in fact all living things emit light through chemical reactions of free radicals in our bodies. Supposedly the glow follows a circadian rhythm and peaks in late afternoon and supposedly faces are the shiniest part of our body and that for the glow of a person to best show up in these studies they needed to be clean and naked, the dirt and sweat and anything covering us obscures the photons.\*

Maybe this is something of what people who speak of seeing auras are talking about, I wouldn't doubt that there are those among us who can pick up on our glowing more than others of us. And then of course there are the accounts of mystical experiences where people reference this reality as well. One of my favorite descriptions is the monk who was a hermit in Kentucky, Thomas Merton, who on March 18<sup>th</sup> 1958 at the corner of 4<sup>th</sup> and Walnut in Louisville had a profound mystical experience. There's actually a plaque there to mark it, funny enough! He said this in his book "Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander":

In Louisville, at the corner of Fourth and Walnut, in the center of the shopping district, I was suddenly overwhelmed with the realization that I loved all those people, that they were mine and I theirs, that we could not be alien to one another even though we were total strangers. It was like waking from a dream of separateness, of spurious self-isolation ... This sense of liberation from an illusory difference was such a relief and such a joy to me that I almost laughed out loud... I have the immense joy of being

(hu)man, a member of a race in which God Himself became incarnate. As if the sorrows and stupidities of the human condition had overwhelmed me, now I realize what we all are. And if only everybody could realize this! But it cannot be explained. There is no way of telling people that they are all walking around shining like the sun.

“We are all walking around shining like the sun.” And as the plaque says in Louisville, this revelation led him into a deeper engagement, even as a monk living in a hermitage by himself, through his writings to press for greater social justice in this country. “We are all walking around shining like the sun.”

It was a mystical experience that Peter, James and John had on the mountaintop that day with Jesus too when he transfigured before their eyes... or was it that they, for a moment in time, suddenly saw him as he truly was, saw this human being, saw the human being, aglow with the light of God. And in this vision or in this deeper glimpse into the heart of things, into the truth of things, they saw 2 great patriarchs of the faith there beside Jesus, the great liberator Moses who led the Hebrew people out of slavery and into the Promised Land and the great prophet Elijah who was protector of Israel’s relationship with God at a time when so many had turned to the worship of other gods. The great liberator and the great protector stood on either side of Jesus, the great savior, and supposedly he was shining like the sun.

We are privy to this vision through our scriptures this morning just before we enter into the season of Lent. You see we’ve been in the season of the light of epiphany and just like a light will sometimes flare up before its extinguished so too this is the vision of Jesus flaring up before he moves towards Jerusalem and falls to ashes there. But this, this vision gifts us first with at least three things that can help us prepare to enter into the penitential season of ashes.

First of all, we are reminded that there is the everyday seeing that we usually and casually live by and then there is really seeing that we might be occasionally blessed with, these momentary visions that usually flare up and illuminate the world, as Merton's did, with a deeper and truer sense of the love that is at the heart of things, of the light that dwells within all of us our loves, friends, and enemies alike, we see, that we all glow. Have you had that experience of that kind of seeing, that kind of illumination? The founder of Methodism, John Wesley, described his experience as his "heart strangely warmed"? We can't make such experience happen, such insights like Wesley's or Merton's or Peter's happen, they just occur, unexpectedly, like in a shopping district in a random city and they come as pure gift. But we certainly can position ourselves to be better open to such experiences and the season of Lent is ideal for that positioning. What can we remove from our daily routines and lives or add into them that might leave us more susceptible to an experience of the Indwelling Divine shining within us and within others? Can we sit with boredom more and not turn to our phones? Can we give up some habitual routine that numbs us? Might we take on a new practice of prayer or reading that helps us to see better? First of all, there is the everyday seeing and then there's the deeper seeing if we truly want to see.

Secondly, whether we have the mystical experience or not, we can take the mystics word for it and accept it ourselves, that what is truest is not our separateness and isolation from one another but our deeper and truer connectedness. The mystic Julian of Norwich experienced this and wrote – "the love of God creates in us such a one-ing that when it is truly seen no person can separate themselves from another." Can we have our awareness altered this Lent

for us to see how intimately we are a part of one another and that your sorrow is my sorrow, your loss my loss, your gain my gain? What encounters might God grant us where this way of seeing things can ignite a response in us, from the homeless on the street we might pass to our neighbor whose in a hard spot to someone we do not like but to whom we find a way to care to our non-human neighbors and seeing them as glowing with the light of God.

On Friday I saw the remarkable documentary called “All that Breathes” about these couple of men in Delhi, India who have made it their life’s purpose to help and restore wounded kites which are birds of prey there. I mean these birds are a dime a dozen swarming around trash heaps in Delhi and these gentle men have given their lives to them and what the documentary reveals in this breathtakingly quiet way is how their devotion to these birds is a devotion to life itself, a devotion to All That Breathes, a devotion to God. We are all of a piece. If we truly accepted that, how would we then be called to act in the world? Could Lent be a time to try and see that and act like that just a little more?

And thirdly, it’s worth noting that there seems to be a reason Jesus glows. Just as the Japanese scientists came to realize that the light emitted from a human being is better seen when they are clean, free of grime and dirt and clothes, one of the ways that we as humans seem to best hide our light and conversely one of the ways that great saints and luminaries in the world seem to shine is when they relinquish rivalry over and against one another. Not only do saints and luminaries have the capacity to see more deeply and recognize our connectedness, our oneness with all life, they then act in ways that bring such oneness and connection fully into the light of day. There’s an erroneous belief, call it THE original sin if you like, that for us to BE we must displace the other, but

this is not so, this is illusion and sin. Think of all the great luminaries, the Gandhi's and Martin Luther King's and Dorothy Days and consider the lesser knowns – some of whom we'll consider in our soup and saints series on Tuesday evenings during Lent starting a week from this Tuesday evening - and you'll see that they work towards great love and justice not by fighting enemies but in an effort to convert them to their friends, not by displacing them but bringing them alongside the movement towards what is good and right. Jesus is the quintessential example of this, he is unwilling to transfer the sorrow and suffering and pain onto others but rather receives it all into himself and transforms that pain as if in a furnace to forge something new and beautiful. This is why he shines like the sun, it's the light from that furnace. His true nature is unencumbered by that which obscures our light, he needs not to displace others in order to establish himself rather he allows himself to be displaced for the sake of others. This isn't a vision of him on the mountaintop that reminds us that although he's going to go through some awfully human things, he's really God, but it's a vision that shows him glowing, shining bright like the sun because he's choosing the path that blesses all of life while not displacing other and that is how the human glows.

It's been called The Indwelling Divine, the Christ within, Dayspring of the soul. "Dayspring from on high be near, Day-star in my heart appear. Till Thy inward light impart, glad my eyes and warm my heart."

\*Source: <https://journals.plos.org/plosone/article?id=10.1371/journal.pone.006256>.

Source: <https://www.sciencealert.com/you-can-t-see-it-but-humans-actually-glow-in-visible-light>