

“Witnessing to Light and Shadows”  
A sermon by the Reverend Joe Genau  
for Edgewood Presbyterian Church  
Luke 9:28-45  
February 26, 2017  
Transfiguration of the Lord

I want to start at the end of this reading. When we gather here on Wednesday night to receive ashes and begin our Lenten journey, we’re going to pick up just about here, and Jesus is going to set his face to go to Jerusalem. He’s going to be heading toward his death, and throughout Lent, we’ll hear what he does and says along the way. But he knows what he will find in Jerusalem. And we know. It will be agony and betrayal and death. It will be abandonment. It will be injustice.

And it will be salvation and miracle and resurrection. It will be the mystery of mysteries, the very definition of redemption and love. It will be the song of hope that has echoed through the church for two thousand years.

Last year, a megachurch in Birmingham invited worshipers to their “Easter Experience” — with the opportunity to beat the crowds and have that experience on Friday or Saturday. You know, Easter Friday and Easter Saturday. Or what we refer to as Good Friday and Holy Saturday — you know, the sad parts. I’m picking on them, but it’s natural to want to take the express train past the ugly stuff.

You know the people who tell you about their fabulous vacation and never once have the decency to mention one thing that went wrong: a sunburn, an airplane debacle, a bathing suit incident. No, everything was perfect. But, of course, their story is horribly dull.

Of course, there are also the folks who want to tell you how horrible things are every waking moment of their lives. These are the folks whose birthday cakes are too sweet, who don’t find anything funny, and who can’t enjoy a good baseball game.

Have you ever seen a photograph that was purely light, with no shadows, no imperfect reflections of light, in which no light was absorbed? No, you haven’t! That’s not a thing you’d be able to see, you see? What about an image that was all shadow with zero light? Of course you haven’t. Light travels about 93 million miles from the sun bound for the earth’s surface, and there you are with your three friends — you’re “Y” and they are “M,” “C,” and “A” — and you’re what stops that sunlight from completing it’s trip.

Life is both light and shadows. The Christian life is both light and shadows.

Immediately after Jesus heals a boy — gives a man back his son — everyone is pretty jazzed about God. It’s Mardi Gras! God is good! Everybody’s astounded! Right then, right in that moment, “While everyone was amazed at all that he was doing, Jesus said to his disciples, “Let these words sink into your ears: The Son of Man is going to be betrayed into human hands.” There are shadows here, and they need to be acknowledged. But the disciples don’t get it, they can’t understand it. And they were afraid.

He'd said this stuff before. In fact, he'd talked about it just a week earlier. He'd said stuff about being rejected and suffering and dying and folks carrying crosses. These shadows are perplexing and scary.

In between these two passion predictions, he goes up on the mountain to pray. Only in Luke does it note that the purpose of the climb is to pray. And then Jesus lights up like the Vegas strip. Peter, John, and James were all drowsy, but even they notice this: Jesus is dazzling and Elijah and Moses are there! And this is a world without shadows. And Peter thinks it could be pretty wonderful to live up here. As he registers that helpful suggestion, he and his buddies are swallowed up by a cloud. I imagine that was a disorienting experience, to go from overwhelming glorious, triumphant light to not being able to see, as your whole body enters a cloud — those things that float across the sky casting shadows upon the earth. The text says they were “terrified.”

Seven weeks ago was Baptism of the Lord Sunday. Y'all remember that Sunday? I gave the best sermon I've ever preached that Sunday. The only problem was that I was wrapped up in a blanket, talking to a big hot cup of coffee, truly not sure what to do with myself on a day we'd cancelled church because of icy roads. One of the things I pointed out to my cup of coffee that morning was that in the Gospel of Luke, unlike in Matthew, when Jesus gets baptized, the voice from heaven talks directly to him, saying “*You are my beloved Son.*” We're not sure that anyone else heard that.

With Peter and company inside the cloud, a voice came from the cloud and said, “*This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!*” We've heard stories over the past few weeks about people trying to figure out Jesus's identity. They see authority. They see power. They wonder who he really is. And here, God bears witness to who Jesus is.

You may have noticed an addition to our sanctuary this morning. That old rugged cross over there, crafted by dear Kenny Smith, usually doesn't show up until Ash Wednesday. It sits over there throughout Lent, and on Maundy Thursday it gets covered with a black cloth. And then on Good Friday it gets hauled up to Homewood Central Park, so the churches of Homewood can take turns carrying it down Oxmoor Road in solemn procession. It is the symbol of our faith. And it will be here on that most joyful third day. But for the most part, this particular cross is one of shadows.

We pulled it out a few days early this year so that it could stand with these lights that arrived with Christmas and have been our Epiphany stars since. The lights will disappear today. But for this moment, our sanctuary is bearing witness to both light and shadows.

*This is my Son.* God bearing witness to Jesus's identity is light and shadow. It is opaque cloud and dazzling white. It is bright stars and cross. It is mountaintop and Golgotha. Jesus is the Christ. The Messiah. The anointed one. God with us. Redemption. Healing. Grace. Jesus is the Christ. The Messiah. Who will be rejected. Who will suffer. Who will die. Who will be raised. We are called to witness to both light and shadows.

I don't know if you've noticed, but the world seems to be struggling with complexity right now. Complexity does not make for good Facebook posts. Complexity does not get clicks on your website. Complexity does not win elections. Complexity is hard work and it is boring.

I wonder if this is the Church's particular call at a time such as this: to bring complexity. To bear witness to the fact that life is not black or white. Life is not blue or red. Life is a rainbow! Life is not light *or* shadows. Life is both light and shadows.

Witnessing to light and shadows means declaring unapologetically and without pause that we will love our neighbors and will resist any attempt to diminish the holy light placed within one of God's children. We will not be dragged into shadowy fear by believing that the shade of someone's skin makes them a shady character.

We see light in our schools, where teachers and their beloved students deserve the very best resources we can muster. We see light in the arts, where lives are changed and brains are unleashed. We see light in our communities, where investment in relationships makes for safer streets and safer beats for cops. We see light in science and technology. We see light in women and girls getting opportunities their mothers and grandmothers didn't have. We see light in collaboration with people of all faiths to bring about God's peace.

And as we bear witness to light, we must not ignore the shadows. If God will bear witness to the brokenness and cruelty of our world, so must we. We make certain that the world knows that we see the shadows, and we will name the shadows. Back in November, this pulpit noted that the mocking of people with disabilities, the denigration of women, and overt racism and homophobia had been legitimized and ushered back into the mainstream — out of the shadows in which they'd been lurking. We are seeing that this was not overstated. So we witness to the shadows. When Islamic centers and synagogues and cemeteries are vandalized, damaged, and threatened, we will bear witness. When white supremacists distribute leaflets in our neighborhoods, we will bear witness. When transgender children of God are put at risk out of deeply misplaced fear, we will bear witness.

To only bear witness to shadows is to completely miss hope. To only bear witness to light is to either live a fanciful existence, or to demonstrate great privilege. It is to speak as Peter spoke: "Let's just stay in the light. None of this bad stuff. It's such a downer."

In faithfulness, we grapple with both glory and death, knowing that they are inextricably interwoven. We do this with our God-given brains, and our path-walking feet, and with our torn-open hearts.

This is not only the last Sunday before Lent, but also the last Sunday in February - Black History Month. Negro History Week was expanded to Black History Month in 1976. So when I was coming up through elementary school in the 1980s, February brought a mad rush on the oaktag supplies of our local stores as each kid in my class presented on a different figure from African American history. Rosa Parks, Frederick Douglass, Martin Luther King, Jackie Robinson, and Harriet Tubman were most popular. Every year someone would get a little more daring: James Brown, Langston Hughes, or Billie Holiday.

I remember some members of my family thinking these Black History Month projects were a terrible idea. "First of all," they'd wonder, "when is white history month?" Even in third grade I knew that question flat out ridiculous. And then another objection would come: "They're making you learn about stuff we don't need to discuss anymore." These objections were a protest against bearing witness to both light and shadows.

The hymn we will sing at the end of our service was originally a poem. It was written by James Weldon Johnson, the principal of the segregated Stanton School in Jacksonville, Florida for a celebration of President Lincoln's birthday in February of 1900. Five hundred students read the poem aloud in order to introduce honored guest Booker T. Washington. Johnson's brother John later put the poem to music.

We're about to sing a hymn of glory. And then we'll hear a witness to the light happening within our denomination. We'll pass the peace and give from what we have been given. And then we'll meet at the Lord's table - a celebration, a memorial, the meal shared in the shadow of betrayal, the meal shared in glorious unity and anticipation. It is a meal of brokenness. It is a meal of hope. We will share our joys and concerns in prayer, and then we will sing the Johnson brothers' hymn, which is often referred to as the "Black National Anthem." Could a song bear more perfect witness to both light and shadows?

*Sing a song full of the faith that the dark past has taught us,  
Sing a song full of the hope that the present has brought us, ...  
Stony the road we trod,  
Bitter the chastening rod,  
Felt in the days when hope unborn had died;  
Yet with a steady beat,  
Have not our weary feet  
Come to the place for which our parents sighed...  
Out from the gloomy past, till now we stand at last  
Where the white gleam of our bright star is cast.*

Amen.