

**FIRST PARISH CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH
UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST
East Derry, New Hampshire**

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26 February 2006

Last Sunday after Epiphany

In the Light

2 Corinthians 4:3-6
Mark 9:2-9

Darkness and light. Suffering and glory. Doom and gloom and possibility and promise. That's what this day is all about: the tension, the dichotomy, the vision and perspective. Since the 6th of January, we've been in the season of epiphany, a season of light and revelation and the presence of God being revealed in the person of Jesus. So today, on the last Sunday after Epiphany, the lectionary gives us one last glimpse of glory and light to comfort and accompany us as we enter the darker and more difficult season of Lent.

And the piece we're given is the story of a bright and brilliant light shining on, in and through Jesus. He'd taken his closest associates, Peter, James and John, to the top of a high mountain, off by themselves where they could have a private conference. They'd hardly begun when Jesus lit up, and the light that pulsed through his clothes was brighter than any bleach, laundry detergent, window cleaner or special effects person could begin to imagine, even these days with all of our advances and marvels. To say they were blinded by the light would be an understatement. They were baffled, bewildered, blown away and blinded. And since Peter was never the one to leave an awkward silence empty, he rushed in with a plan: let's capture this moment and make it last forever. I knew I was right about you being God's Messiah – this pulsating, radiating light proves it. Now all we need to do is capture the moment and we'll have all the proof we need. We'll live happily ever after in the light of your presence.

See, I suspect that part of what Peter was running away from was the second half of the conversation he'd had with Jesus six days earlier. He'd made his wonderful confession that Jesus was the Messiah; one minute Jesus was slapping him on the back, praising him for his insight, and the next Jesus was talking about suffering and rejection and death. Now that the glory was back, Peter wanted to delete that suffering part, and just live in the ecstasy of the glory of God shining through Jesus. But Jesus said no: no tents, no photo op, no press release; we've got to go back. And it was only a few verses later that he was back to talking about rejection and betrayal and death.

A glimpse of glory wedged in between the words that foretold of the suffering that was to come. A beacon of light shining into the darkness, not driving the darkness away, but offering the light that Peter and his friends would need to find their way through the darkness. If the choice had been theirs, the darkness would have been driven away once and for all. But the choice wasn't theirs; the darkness was a part of their world and a part of their lives and very much a part of

their future. The choice that was theirs was whether or not to embrace the light that was offered, and to keep on embracing it when all other signs of light were long gone.

We know a fair amount about the darkness, about suffering and pain, about doom and gloom. Whether it's the pain and fear of illness or the searing emptiness of loss and death; whether it's harassment at work or rejection at home or the rising cost of oil or the health care coverage that covers a little less every year; whether it's the stories of homelessness or hunger or war time atrocities or child abductions and senseless shootings: we know far more than we would ever want to know about the darkness. What we've lost sight of is the light. We let ourselves be trapped in the darkness and despair, and let go of the promise and possibility of light. But as Paul reminds us in the lesson from 2nd Corinthians, it wasn't just a light that shone on Jesus. He wrote, "For 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."

One of my permanent images of what it means to hold on to the glory of God's light shining in the darkness is the image of Nelson Mandela walking out of prison. And it's not just the fact that after all those horrible years, he was finally released; but that after being trapped and isolated and tortured in apartheid's dungeon for a generation, cut off from those he loved, paying in the flesh for what he believed, suffering more than we even want to imagine, he walked out with his head up, his heart open, his vision intact. He endured those years with the presence and warmth of the light of God's grace and glory, and once free, he shared that light with his beloved South Africa.

South Africa's a long way off, and it's been years since Mandela was released from that prison, and officially, apartheid is a thing of the past. Unfortunately, there's still darkness and fear and suffering and pain – in South Africa, and in all too many parts of the world. And in the midst of the darkness, there is also a light that shines on, that refuses to be snuffed out by hatred or suffering or fear. I was impressed with an article in the latest magazine from Habitat for Humanity that carried me to Northern Ireland. We don't hear a lot about that conflict these days, but the story brought me face to face with it. The centuries of conflict, punctuated by three decades of intense violence, was summarized by saying that for 30 years more than 3,600 people – Catholics, Protestants, young, old, often innocent – died violently, and one in every 50 people was injured. If the same ratio were applied to the United States, the number of injured would exceed the population of Minnesota. Pubs and banks were bombed; residents were abducted from neighborhood sidewalks, then killed or beaten and left for dead; masked gunmen, fueled by hatred and loyalist or republican fury, raided homes or businesses, stealing fathers from daughters, sons from mothers, neighbors from neighbors. For years, nightly riots were the norm, and families crouched in darkness, sleeping in shifts, keeping buckets of water on hand in order to more quickly douse flaming gasoline bombs.

In order to stop or at least minimize the violence, authorities erected dozens of what they called "peace walls" which snake through neighborhoods and reach as high as 50 feet. These walls were meant to provide security and help curb the conflict, but they have in fact provided psychological barriers in addition to the obvious physical ones. Even though a cease fire was declared in 1994 and things have grown calmer, these walls still reinforce the idea that you're not supposed to go to the other side, that you shouldn't get to know the people who live and work and play over there. They've fostered suspicion and mistrust. And they've eaten up a tremendous amount of

space, produced wastelands that otherwise could have been used for housing. A profound housing crisis has resulted, in the midst of generations of people who have grown up not knowing their peers or their needs on the other side of the wall.

Habitat for Humanity is working in the midst of that, and has been since 1994. They've built 47 houses, which is important, but not the most important part of what they're doing. They're using volunteers from both sides of the wall to build those houses in single-identity neighborhoods, having already completed 8 in a Protestant neighborhood in North Belfast, and now working on numbers 7 and 8 in a nearby Catholic neighborhood. The scars still run too deep for integrated communities, but it's a major breakthrough to have volunteers crossing back and forth to work on each other's homes. In the midst of large murals that display militants with black guns and black masks, people are venturing into communities they've never seen before, accompanied by their all too vivid memories of mutilations and killings. They're going to create housing, and in the midst of it enemies are becoming neighbors, and hatred is giving way to understanding and recognition. The article pointed to two women who still live in separate neighborhoods, but worked hand in hand building houses, and now watch each other's children, go to movies together, and take vacations together. Their children are growing up, not knowing each other as Catholic and Protestant but instead as neighbor and friend. (*Habitat World*, "The Twain Shall Meet", pages 6-11)

Paul wrote, "For 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." Let that light shine, my friends. In the season of Lent when the darkness closes in around Jesus, let it shine. And in our own lives and world when the darkness of fear and suffering, hatred and pain threaten to close in around us. Let God's light shine out of darkness. Let the light of the warmth and love and grace of God shine.

Amen.