

REFLECTION
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The Reverend Dr. Phebe L. McPherson

Mark 9: 2-9

Jesus took with him Peter and James and John, and led them up a high mountain apart, by themselves. And he was transfigured before them, and his clothes became dazzling white, such as no one on earth could bleach them...ff

Today is the last Sunday before Lent begins. We have spent the season of Epiphany, a season which begins in the darkest time of the year, waiting for the light to reappear. We have moved through the season of Epiphany beginning with a bright star in the night sky over Bethlehem to a blinding light that the disciples witnessed on a mountaintop in Galilee—an event called the Transfiguration. But, before we say goodbye to seasonal darkness let's think about what it means to live in the dark for a moment. Barbara Brown Taylor writes:

“Darkness” is shorthand for anything that scares me — that I want no part of — either because I am sure that I do not have the resources to survive it or because I do not want to find out. The absence of God is in there, along with the fear of dementia and the loss of those nearest and dearest to me. So is the melting of polar ice caps, the suffering of children, and the nagging question of what it will feel like to die. If I had my way, I would eliminate everything from chronic back pain to the fear of the devil from my life and the lives of those I love — if I could just find the right night-lights to leave on.

Taylor's book, *Learning to Walk in the Dark* (HarperOne, 2014) reflects on how our lives do not work even when everything is fully lit. We can't always see the light. It waxes and wanes or can go out altogether. What we need is a spirituality that works in the nighttime.

She continues,

I wish I could turn to the church for help, but so many congregations are preoccupied with keeping the lights on right now that the last thing they want to talk about is how to befriend the dark. Plus, Christianity has never had anything nice to say about darkness. From earliest times, Christians have used “darkness” as a synonym for sin, ignorance, spiritual blindness, and death. Visit almost any church and you can still hear it used that way today: *Deliver us, O Lord, from the powers of darkness. Shine into our hearts the brightness of your Holy Spirit, and protect us from all perils and dangers of the night.*

Taylor lives out in the country now—someplace in Georgia. She’s a retired Episcopal priest and well-published preacher. It’s dark out in the country. She tells of hearing her chickens screech, stumbling through the dark to the coop, reaching in, only to be startled, horrified, when she put her hands into one of the nesting boxes and touches the skin of slick black snake. Taylor’s book is a sort of *field guide* on how to navigate through the dark—in body and in spirit.

Imagine for a moment climbing a mountain in first century Palestine—Galilee. Jesus takes Peter, James and John, on a hike up Mount Tabor.

I’ve been walking trails lately around Anne Arundel County. There are some breathtaking wooded trails with ravines and ridges—anchored by the trunks of elephant-like beach trees and deeply curved and winding streams. That means they are very old. It’s dark and cool in the woods but you must keep your eyes on the rocks and roots—and the slippery mud. In late afternoon the sun comes through the canopy at an angle that gives everything a golden glow.

Peter, James and John and Jesus. There’s a word in Hebrew for the golden glow—a word for the light—the experience of that light that signifies a divine visitation of God’s presence or the *dwelling of the God on earth*. The word is not found in the Bible, but the concept clearly is. *Shekinah*. The word literally means “he caused to dwell” or

“habitation.” It’s the *cloudy pillar in the day and the fiery pillar at night* in Exodus when the Hebrews escaped from Egypt. It’s the pillar that *shone* so that they could travel by day or night. God speaks to Moses out of the *pillar of cloud*. When Moses asked to see God’s glory—*God hid Moses in the cleft of a rock, covered him with his hand and passed by*. When Moses looked, he saw only God’s back. God’s glory is too awesome and too powerful for human eyes.

Shekinah. Today’s Gospel lesson is about *Shekinah*. Matthew, Mark, and Luke proclaim and show us in their Gospels that

Jesus is the dwelling place of God’s glory.

Although the story of the Transfiguration does not appear in the Gospel of John—in John’s Gospel, Jesus says to Philip:

Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father. (John 14:9)

The *Presence of God* dwells in the man who was Jesus.

With Lent soon upon us and with the restrictions of COVID still in effect, I wonder if I might challenge each of us to spend more time out in the places where we might encounter *the Shekinah* of God. Outdoors. Where we are available—where we are vulnerable to the power of God in creation. Where we can relearning to see. Re-establish who’s who. For it is God who is the creator, and we— are God’s creatures. Outdoors, where we can find light in our own darkneses.

Tom Stoner, the founder of *Nature Sacred* (which used to be called The TKF Foundation)—and who supported the design and installation of the Epiphany labyrinth—and also the creation of the Chaplains’ Peace Garden writes this:

- We're in the throes of an unprecedented migration of two kinds— we're fleeing the country for the city; and the visual for the virtual.
- We're more urban and digital than ever before— living our lives largely enclosed in urban landscapes often devoid of trees, plants— greenspaces.
- At the same time, stress levels are rising. Though medicine has seen incredible advances in recent decades, life spans that had for many years been lengthening are actually now contracting.
- And our communities are facing old and new challenges alike. Some manmade; some natural.
- As a nation, we are quick to acknowledge the destructive power of nature. But we are guilty of under-recognizing its capacity to heal; to promote well-being, and of under-investing in green infrastructure that has the potential to combat a host of personal and, by extension, societal ills.
- Often forgotten is the fact that we are part of nature. Our need to connect with it is innate. When it is lost, we suffer. When it's restored, we thrive.

The theology of the Transfiguration caught the attention of the early Church Fathers.

In the second century, Irenaeus wrote:

The glory of God is the person fully alive.

The Glory of God. *Shekinah*. Seeing the Glory of God gives life. I challenge each of us to hike the woods, stroll the beach, sit in a garden, listen to the birds, walk the Epiphany labyrinth:

- walk your *darkness* in partnership with God in Jesus Christ
- transform the *motions of living* with awe and joy and wonder
- love God by *seeing and loving* the things God loves
- be transformed, transfigured, *fully alive—a glory of God*.
- rediscover the *glory of God* in nature and,
- reconnect with God's own nature deep within yourself—and each of us.

Amen.