

Seeing the Light

Genesis 12:1-4a; Romans 4:1-5, 13-17; Matthew 17:1-9; Psalm 121 2-17-08



A few days ago, Vima and I had the opportunity to go over some of the hymns from the new hymnal, Hymns for A Pilgrim People. In an hour we went through almost fifty hymns determining which were sing-able, which were not and which might be. We still have about 20 left to go. We were surprised by the variety of music we found. We readily recognized those hymns that “sounded like us” and those that did not. We kept most of them for future use.

During this excursion through the hymnal, we came across Hank Williams’ song “I Saw the Light.” This is one we most likely will not sing together, although, you never know. Next week there will be a little space in the service during which you will be able to choose a few hymns that you would like to sing and we will sing them together. We will try to do this once each month, on the last Sunday, as we become familiar with the hymnal.

Because of the musical journey I took with Vima, when it came time to reflect upon and put together this morning’s sermon, I could not get the song, “I Saw the Light,” out of my mind. Those of you who have been around me during these past six years know this is nothing new. I often think in music. So, when I pictured those disciples standing up on that mountain and regarding the scene before them, I wondered if they realized they were seeing the light of the past guiding them into the future and into a new channel of their religion.

Before them were Jesus, Elijah and Moses. The symbolism of this should not be missed. Moses represented the law, Elijah the prophets and they came together in Jesus. All three elements were important to the new interpretation of Judaism Jesus was making through his life and teachings.

Peter, in his desire to build three huts for the men he saw before him, did not recognize what this appearance meant. He needed to make what he saw real and concrete so that he could wrap his mind around the event. It is understandable that he could not see beyond the dazzling light that seemed to surround the three. It was frightening and he simply did not know what to make of it. It is to his credit that he did not simply run away. Added to the light was the voice of the great “I Am,” confirming that, “This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased; listen to him.”

We always need to remember that the author of Matthew was the most Jewish of the gospel writers and that he was writing for a Jewish audience. He also was the author who worked the hardest to incorporate Hebrew Bible prophecy into his writing, showing how Jesus was the fulfillment of those words. He used prophecies to prove his point more times than the three other writers of the gospels.

While this experience with Jesus must have been somewhat illuminating for the disciples present, we must wonder if and how it changed the way they understood just who Jesus was and what he was about. While Abraham, in our reading for today, saw the light of God's request that he leave his home and journey on to a new place, without any hesitation, it seems that the disciples continued their struggle to grasp just who Jesus was and what following him meant.

We are not so different, you and I. We cannot always grasp what it means to follow Jesus. Some of us might have flashes of insight, times when we "see the light," and move forward in life with no hesitation and no doubt. But for most of us the dawn of a new, better way of doing things comes slowly as we turn from an old way of life to a new one.

This is because we are comfortable in old familiar places and with old familiar mindsets. When we try to think outside of our well-defined boxes, things can become confusing and frightening. We might stick a finger outside our space to test the way the wind blows and then, when we determine that things are safe, take a hesitant step in a new direction making sure to leave a door open behind us in case we need to make a hasty retreat. Life is made up of such tentative steps and when we decide to refrain from taking them, we cease to grow and cease to live in the fullness of life. We become rigid and set in our ways.

This is not a healthy way to live. If we consider the pages of scripture we hold as sacred, we discover that God was and is always stirring up God's people and trying to move them right along. From the days of Abraham through the pages of the New Testament there is no call for us to remain static and locked in one place and into one way of thinking. To do that is to become stagnant and to eventually die.

Jesus pointed the way toward forward movement and change when he told his disciples, in a few verses before this morning's reading, that if they desired to follow him, they must take up their crosses. "For whoever would save his life," he reminded them, "will lose it and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it. For what will it profit a man, if he gains the whole world and forfeits his life." These are words of action and forward motion. They are words of encouragement and growth. They are words intended to help those who followed him to see the commitment they needed to make to be true disciples. They were meant to help people begin to see the light.

When we are finally able to see the light, something happens to us. The light does not remain outside of us. When we understand fully how we are to live and move and have our being, the light is integrated into us and shines through us for others to see. We change and we become agents of change for our weary world.

In the words of Hank Williams: "I saw the light, I saw the light. No more darkness, no more night! Now I am happy, no sorrow in sight. Praise the Lord! I saw the light."

Will we see the light of a new way and a new day? If we want to. The choice is always ours.

--Amen