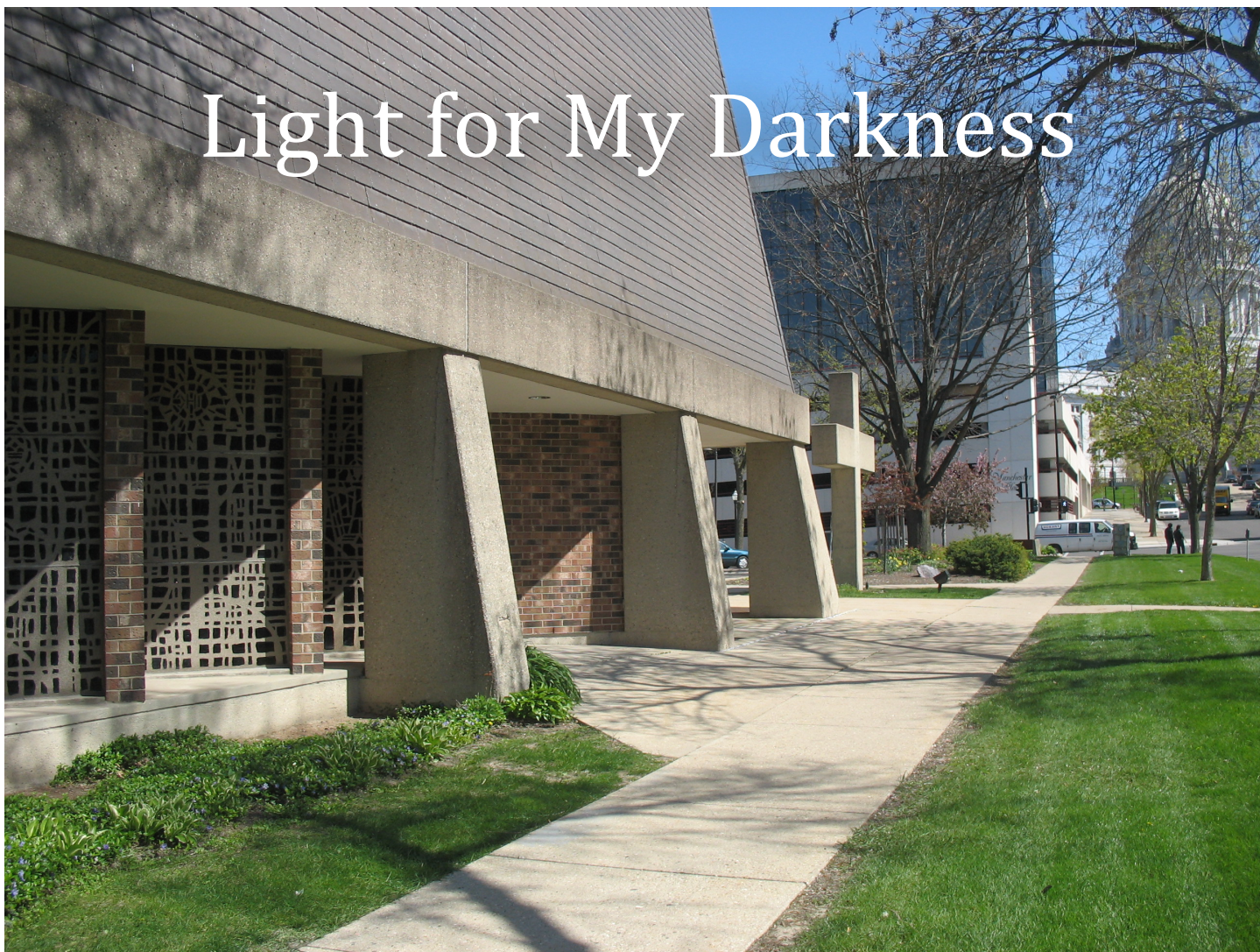


Rev. Phil Blackwell • Sunday, February 7, 2016  
Text: Luke 9:28-43

# Light for My Darkness



First United  
Methodist Church

DOWNTOWN FOR GOOD

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“Light For My Darkness” . . . the title comes from a prayer offered by Howard Thurman.

“O Holy God, open unto me light for my darkness, courage for my fear, hope for my despair.

O loving God, open unto me wisdom for my confusion, forgiveness for my sins, love for my hate.

O God of peace, open unto me peace for my turmoil, joy for my sorrow, strength for my weakness.

O generous God, open my heart to receive all your gifts. Amen.”

Howard Thurman, born in 1899, grew up in Daytona Beach, Florida, raised by his grandmother after his father died and while his mother worked a full-time job to make ends meet. His grandmother had been a slave and schooled Howard over and over as a child that he was not a slave but a child of God. When he was in seventh grade his family scraped together just enough money to pay for his rail ticket to attend a proper boarding school in Jacksonville.

When he got to the station he was told that it would cost extra to ship his luggage on the train. He sat down on the platform and cried. A black man in overalls walked up to him, talked with him about the problem, and paid the fee for Howard’s luggage. Sixty-five years later when Howard Thurman wrote his autobiography, With Head and Heart, he dedicated it to “the stranger in the railroad station in Daytona Beach who restored my broken dream.” Light shining into our darkness can come in many forms, including a stranger paying the price of shipping our suitcases to Jacksonville.

Thurman went on to become a minister, starting with a church in Oberlin, Ohio, teaching at Morehouse and Spelman colleges, meeting Mohandas Gandhi in India, founding a racially integrated, non-denominational church in San Francisco long before it was acceptable, and serving as the chaplain at Boston University’s Marsh Chapel. One of the students who experienced his ministry there was Martin Luther King, Jr.

Thurman’s prayer: “O God, open unto me light for my darkness.” If we are honest with ourselves, often our prayer is more demanding: “O God, dispel the darkness in our lives. Make everything goodness and light. Do not make us stumble through the shadows of existence.” Thurman’s prayer is more realistic. Darkness is a given in life, so “God, give us the light to find our way through.” Thurman’s realism embedded in the Civil Rights Movement offered a sense of non-violence that has sustained champions of freedom through the worst oppression and opposition. To change the metaphor, he espoused a gracious love rooted in “the deep river of faith.” “It may twist and turn, fall back on itself and start again, stumble over an infinite series of hindering rocks, but at last the river must answer the call to the sea.” (Jesus and the Disinherited, 1949)

Today Transfiguration Sunday, as we go to the mountaintop with Jesus and three of his disciples, Peter, John, and James, we pray for a glimpse of such a love that will see us through what we can see from “up here,” the dark valleys that lie ahead, symbolized by the season of Lent.

When I grew up in the Methodist Church in Danville, Illinois, and the Evangelical United Brethren Church in Menomonee Falls, the two denominations that joined in 1968 to become the United Methodist Church, I do not remember observing Lent. Maybe the congregations did, but it was lost on me as a boy. Ash Wednesday? Probably not; certainly no ashes, that is what those “other people” did, the superstitious ones who worshiped in a language they did not understand. No Holy Week, no focus on Jesus’ suffering, no Good Friday, with its ironic name. As I recall, we went right from the triumphal entry on Palm Sunday to the brilliant light of the resurrection on Easter Sunday.

One of the great gifts to Protestantism bestowed by the Second Vatican Council fifty years ago was the restoration of the liturgical calendar for us middle Protestants. The changes within the Roman Catholic Church opened up dialogue with the rest of us, and we came away the richer for it, retrieving the details of our faith to which we had become blind.

Darkness and light . . . I have a book entitled Voigtlander and I, with an umlaut over the “a”. It was printed in 1902 by The Cleveland Printing and Publishing Co. It is a recollection written by James Ryder of his fifty-two years as a newspaper photographer in Cleveland, Ohio; “Voigtlander” was the name of the make of his camera. It is the subtitle that is provocative: “In Pursuit of Shadow-Catching.” We get no photograph if everything is light and there is no darkness at all. And, conversely, we get no photograph if everything is absolutely dark. We see things in perspective, we see things in detail, when there is an interplay of light and dark. Seeing things as they truly are is, in large part, catching the shadows.

So, here we go up the mountain to pray, Jesus and the disciples to get away from it all down in the valley. It is night; it is dark. And then something strange occurs. As they are praying, there is a celestial light that shines through Jesus’ countenance and turns his garments to gleaming white. Then, two others appear, Moses the lawgiver, and Elijah the prophet, and they talk to Jesus about what is to come next . . . the shadow of his arrest, persecution, and crucifixion. Here are all of the law and the prophets personified by two figures talking with the embodiment of God, bathed in heavenly light, anticipating the impending darkness.

The three disciples are almost asleep until this godly night light shocks them to attention. They see, they hear, and then it is all over. It is dark again. Peter, always the impetuous one, exclaims, “It is a good thing we are here with you, Jesus, to witness what just occurred. Let us build three shrines up here, one for Moses, one for Elijah, and one for you, to perpetuate this moment.” This is truly a “mountaintop experience,” one which the disciples want to prolong, to bask in, to live in forever. “Let us reside up here, far away from the madding crowd, in the glorious light of God!”

But God does not reveal the truth so blatantly to us all at once; we could not grasp it. We cannot survive living in the unremitting brilliance of the mountaintop. Emily Dickinson:

Tell all the Truth but tell it slant –  
Success in Circuit lies  
Too bright for our infirm Delight  
The Truth's superb surprise  
As Lightning to the Children Eased  
With explanation kind  
The Truth must dazzle gradually  
Or every man be blind - (Acts of Light, p.69)

As Peter babbles on, God interrupts him. That is the time when we know we need to be quiet. "This is my Son, my chosen one. Listen to him!" When have we heard that before? At his baptism when what appeared to be a dove descended upon him and there was a voice from heaven that declared, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." At the beginning of his ministry is this affirmation, at this mountaintop moment before he enters into the time of suffering and death, and then at his resurrection when he can declare it to his amazed followers.

We are about to enter into the shadowy season of Lent, and before we do God gives us a clarifying moment of truth to reveal to us who Jesus is, so that in the coming weeks we will not forget, we will not lose sight; we see the truth realized as is written in the Gospel of John, Chapter 1, "In him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it." The interplay of light and darkness that gradually reveals the truth to us in all of its vivid detail . . . "O God, open unto me light for my darkness."

It is natural for us to want to live on the mountaintop. The view is great, the sunrise and sunset last as long as possible, it is "above it all." But we cannot, and it might even be dangerous. I remember hearing about a person whose goal it was to climb to the highest point of every one of America's fifty states. Now, that is not much when it comes to Timms Hill in Wisconsin, at 1951 feet, and Charles Mound in Illinois at 1235 feet. But then, there is Mt. Washington in New Hampshire at 6288 feet, Mt. Elbert in Colorado at 14,440 and up to Denali in Alaska at 20,310 feet. He was asked after he accomplished his dream, "What was the most dangerous?" He answered, "Well, Britton Hill in Florida was a scare. It is only 345 feet, but I almost got run over by a tour bus."

We cannot live on the mountaintop but only to stay for a moment to see the view and catch the light, and then to head back down to the valley. That is what happens in our gospel account. Jesus says to the disciples, "Let us go back down to where the people living in the darkness of pain and possession need to catch a glimpse of light." And they go, but do the disciples get it? Do they know what they just have experienced? In only a few weeks Peter will deny that he even knows Jesus. "O God, open unto me wisdom for my confusion, forgiveness for my sins, love for my hate."

We remember from our reading of the Exodus story that after forty years of leading the Israelites through the wilderness, Moses never gets to cross the river into the Promised Land. He ascends the mountain, and like Jesus, he is bathed in light from having encountered God, but still the darkness of incompleteness enshrouds him. That image was in the mind of Martin Luther King, Jr., on the last night of his life. He was in Memphis in support of the garbage collectors who were striking in order to receive a living wage. The Civil Rights Movement then, and now, is about justice for all. He said, "I don't know what will happen now. We've got some difficult days ahead. But it doesn't matter with me now. Because I have been to the mountaintop . . . And I've seen the Promised Land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight that we, as a people, will get to the Promised Land."

That journey is ours, all together, and each one of us individually. We stand on this Mount of Transfiguration and see as plain as day the truth evident in Jesus Christ. And in this moment we can envision the light of the Resurrection showing us the way forward in our lives. So, yes, let the band play, and let us celebrate Mardi Gras and use up the fat in our kitchens to make pancakes and paczkis. But let us not be afraid this week to descend back into the shadows of our daily lives, even to submit ourselves to the ashes of mortality, for in that interplay of light and dark we will see our lives clearly.

"O God of peace, open unto me peace for my turmoil, joy for my sorrow, strength for my weakness. O generous God, open my heart to receive all your gifts. Amen."