

The psalmist sings: *God has spoken and summoned the earth, from the rising of the sun to its setting. Out of Zion, the perfection of beauty, God is shining forth* (Ps. 50:1f, RNJB).

The most impressive religious experience I recall, writes William Stafford, *occurred on the banks of the Cimarron River in western Kansas one mild summer evening, when sky, air, birdcalls, and the setting sun combined to expand the universe for me and to give me the feeling of being sustained, cherished, included somehow in a great, reverent story.*

Struck by beauty our vision opens on vistas not ordinarily visible. But if God is always shining forth out of the beauty of creation, why do we not always feel sustained, cherished, included in a great, reverent story? What was different about that one mild summer evening from all others?

Elisha asks Elijah for a double portion of his spirit. This might strike us as greedy, or a sign of insecurity. It more likely refers to the double portion granted the eldest son as inheritance. Elisha, as Elijah's eldest prodigy, is to assume the mantle of leadership. He wants to be fully empowered for the job.

Elijah appears not to know whether Elisha is up to the job: *If you can see me when I am taken, **then** you will receive a double portion of my spirit.* Sometimes prophets can behold the ordinarily unseen. We call it "vision," a glimpse of spiritual reality.

How does this glimpse come about? Is a vision entirely a divine gift that overwhelm's one's senses? Might it be that a vision, at least sometimes, requires heart preparation? On some occasions, one's inability to see might be the consequence of poor character. As the psalmist observes, *with the pure you show yourself pure; and with the crooked you show yourself perverse* [lit. "twisted"] (Ps. 18:26).

If spiritual myopia results from poor character, then the converse may also be true. The early church father Athanasius advised, *For the search and right understanding of the Scriptures there is a need for a good life and a pure soul . . . One cannot possibly understand the teaching of the saints unless one has a pure mind and is trying to imitate their life.*

The Corinthians accused Paul of obscure or obtuse preaching. Paul begs to differ: *We have renounced shameful, hidden things; not acting deceitfully or falsifying the word of God, but by open declaration of the truth we commend ourselves to everyone's conscience in the sight of God* (1 Cor. 4:2 NABRE).

Paul, perhaps a little miffed, says the problem is not with his preaching but with the condition of the souls of the hearers. (Peter might take exception to this since he too found some of Paul's writing hard to understand.) The reason the message appears

veiled, says Paul, the reason they cannot understand, is because their minds are clouded by temporal, transitory desires; they are serving the god of this world.

The early church, Sarah Coakley reminds us, believed *commitment to the discipline of particular graced practices* (worship, contemplative reading of scripture, prayer, acts of charity), *over the long haul, afford certain distinctive ways of knowing.*

Sometimes, perhaps rarely, preparation is not the issue. Jesus led Peter, James and John up the mountain and was transfigured before them. Elijah and Moses appear and talk with Jesus. This is a divine gift that overwhelms the senses, a blinded by the light experience. Moreover, a voice from the cloud reiterates the message heard in Jesus' baptism and issues a direct order: *listen to him.*

Only the inner circle is granted this glimpse of glory which occurs, Mark tells us, six days after the first passion prediction. The glimpse of glory is shadowed by the crucifixion; the crucifixion is illuminated by the glimpse of glory.

The transfiguration is lit by an unearthly light; the crucifixion by a supernatural darkness. In the transfiguration Jesus' clothes become gloriously luminous; in the crucifixion his clothes are stripped off in an action mocking his claim to be "king of the Jews."

In the transfiguration two prophets, Elijah and Moses, visit with Jesus, speak intimately with him, demonstrating their identification with him; in the crucifixion two convicted felons flank him, one rails against him, demonstrating his alienation from Jesus. Other mockers refer sarcastically to an intervention by Elijah that fails to occur.

In the transfiguration Peter offers to build tents of glory; in the crucifixion Peter, following from a distance, denies knowing Jesus and flees the scene. In the transfiguration God's voice booms out his commitment to his beloved Son; in the crucifixion God is silent, and his Son pierces the air with the anguished cry, "Why have you abandoned me?"

Jesus embodies the paradox of the human experience, the light and the dark, the joyful and the tragic. He didn't do this so we could escape the darkness and live only in the light. Rather, he illuminated the way of the cross so that we might *find it none other than the way of life and peace* (Book of Common Prayer).