

Sermon: The Morning Star Rises
Last Sunday of Epiphany, Year A
2 Peter 1:16-21

Shelby Ochs Owen
Emmanuel, Staunton
February 26, 2017

Do we have any night sky watchers here today? Anyone know what is the brightest star, otherwise known as the “morning star” or “evening star”? Correct! Venus! Venus, which is actually a planet, is the second brightest object in the night sky after the moon. It was the first planet to have its motions plotted across the sky in the second millennium BCE. Named after the Roman goddess of beauty and love, Venus, the morning star, appears before sunrise.

Stars shine in several places in our scripture. Early on in one of the creation stories in Genesis, God creates the two great lights and the stars (1.16) and a little later God tells Abraham to go outside his tent and, “Look toward heaven and count the stars, if you are able to count them”, then saying, “So shall your descendents be.” (15.5) The prophets Daniel, Isaiah and Amos mention stars as does the psalmist. In Matthew’s gospel you will recall, no doubt, that the wise men follow a star to find the Christ child. And in Revelation’s final chapter (22.16) Jesus says, “I am the bright morning star.”

This “morning star” appears in today’s reading from the epistle of 2 Peter. Peter uses it as a description of the Messiah, a symbol of Christ. Peter is very excited about sharing his mountain top experience with Jesus, otherwise known as the Transfiguration, with his listeners. He writes, “We did not follow cleverly devised myths when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ but we had the eyewitnesses of his majesty.” Peter, or likely one of his followers, is defending authentic Christian teaching as he addresses a conflicted second century audience. What is real? What is true? So Peter, says, “I saw this amazing scene with my own eyes!” “For (Jesus) received honor and glory from God the Father when that voice was conveyed to him by the Majestic Glory saying, ‘This is my Son, my Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.’” Peter is eager for his audience to know of his first hand experience with Jesus on the holy mountain.

Then Peter adds, “You will do well to be attentive to this as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts.” Peter is calling Christians to have faith, faith in the Christ who is with them now and who will be with them in the future. The Transfiguration was a manifestation of Christ’s glory, not in a perfect, well ordered, peace-filled world. It was quite the opposite. The world into which Jesus was born, lived and died was chaotic and fragile and very dark in many ways. So this fantastic display of his glory was indeed a light shining in the darkness and that experience for Peter was an anchor, a grounding experience that gave him not only an incredible “mountain top experience” but gave him a memory that allowed him hope for the future -- a future day when Christ would return. And Peter wanted his audience to have that same hope, wanted them to know that no matter how chaotic, how fragile, how dark their lives might be that this Jesus, the Christ, was with them and would always be with them. This morning star would forever shine. Peter wanted his listeners to live in anticipation of new heavens and a new earth, even though the world they lived in was at odds with God’s purposes. Peter’s was a call to actualize their faith.

Every day we are reminded that we live in a world that is at odds with God's purposes. It is easy to see that disconnect in others. But do we see it in ourselves? We let so many things get between us and our faith in God. We refuse to forgive. We refuse to be forgiven. We condone and participate in the violence around us in various ways, including our thoughts and words, even in our entertainment. We can be cynical and judge harshly. We let pride and an over-inflated ego steer our actions. We worry. We wallow in anxiety. And we fear.

In Barbara Brown Taylor's book, *Learning to Walk in the Dark*, she writes (p.64) "All we have to do is wake up in the middle of the night and find ourselves unable to go back to sleep, so that we have several hours to obsess about everything from how we will pay our Visa bills to who will take care of us when we can no longer take care of ourselves...There is one cure for me on nights like this. If I can summon the energy to put on my bathrobe and go outside, the night sky will heal me – not by reassuring me that I will be just fine, but by reminding me of my place in the universe. Looking up at the same stars that human beings have been looking at for millennia, I find my place at the end of the long, long line of stargazers who stood here before me.

(Repeat)"I find my place at the end of the long, long line of stargazers who stood here before me." I wonder if we were to gaze for a good while at the Morning Star, the Messiah, the Christ, if we might better find our way. I wonder if we were to gaze long enough at this beautiful face of God that we see in Jesus, if we might find ourselves in love. Find ourselves beloved by God. And find ourselves loving God. And in that great love, we might better be able to lay all that comes between us and God on the altar. Might this be what Peter would say is the morning star rising in our hearts? Allowing God's love to reign in us.

At the beginning of the Eucharistic prayer we say, "Lift up your hearts." "We lift them to the Lord." This lifting of our hearts is God at work in us. Might this be one way we actualize our faith, one way we live into it? By laying all that interferes with our ability to receive God's love on the altar so that, as our collect for today says, we can "be changed into Christ's likeness from glory to glory." We will be people who grow in peace, forgiveness, justice and love for all of God's people.

Venus, a.k.a. the Morning Star, appears before the sunrise, giving us hope of a new day. May Jesus, our Morning Star, rise in your hearts as you are transformed into his likeness.

Amen.