

WHY DID JESUS TURN ON HIS BRIGHTS?
The Transfiguration of Our Lord - February 22, 2009
Mark 9:2-9

Several years ago, I drove to the Monastery of the Holy Trinity in Pikesville to participate in a retreat. I almost didn't make it, because the directions I'd been given were two years out of date. The monastery had sold some of its land, and a townhouse development had sprung up. A connecting road that was supposed to have been built was still a muddy construction dead end.

I backed out, consulted my map (which insisted that the connecting road was really there) and drove around, searching for the right way in. I turned on my brights, because I couldn't see my way forward. I could see the monastery, but not how to get there from here!

An hour later, I found a phone and called the monastery. The patient monk gave me instructions to come in from an entirely different direction, up a dark, winding driveway that wasn't on my map. I soon found the driveway - as obscure as advertised. Once again, on came my brights as I tried to not drive into a tree. At last I reached the place I couldn't seem to get from where I'd been - even when I could see it.

We've all gotten lost on a dark road a few times. Even when we're on a familiar road, we can lose our bearings in darkness, fog and rain.

Often we turn on our vehicle's bright lights to get better sense of what's around us. When the road is narrow, dark and obscure, the brights help us get to our destination. Unless we see the road ahead with all its twists and bumps, we simply won't get there from here.

This brings me the long way around to the question, "Why did Jesus turn on his brights?" Why did he, James, John and Peter ascend Mount Tabor? Why did Jesus suddenly begin to shine more brilliantly than the noonday sun, incandescent with the glory of God? Why does the Church commemorate this vision, only seen by three disciples? Why *do we* celebrate the Feast of the Transfiguration today, anyway?

Perhaps *we* should take a look at a theological road map. Where had Jesus and his disciples just been - not just physically, but in terms of our Lord's ministry? Where were they headed? How would they get there? What lay ahead, around the next bend of the road?

Six days earlier, Peter would have said they were on the highway to heaven. They'd stopped for a breather on the road between Gentile and Jewish territories, at Caesarea Philippi; and Jesus had asked two deceptively simple questions. First: who do people say that I am? After the spate of predictable answers - Elijah, Jeremiah, John the Baptist - had trickled into silence, Jesus asked his followers: Who do *you* say that I am? Into the thundering silence that followed, Peter blurted

out, "You are the Messiah of God." "Yes!" Jesus answered. "But do not speak further of this until you can understand it."

This puzzled Peter; to call Jesus the Messiah was to bestow a title of high honor. The Messiah was seen as a kingly, conquering champion who would sweep God's people into His eternal Kingdom. The disciples probably envisioned a triumphal march along a road that was smooth, wide, bright and short. Why *not* tell others who Jesus was?

But then came terrible words that swept Peter and his companions into confusion, horror and fear. "The road to my Father's Kingdom goes through the valley of the shadow of death. It goes through betrayal, mockery, crucifixion and dying. There is no other way home." "God forbid!" Peter blurted, confident of the road *he'd* seen.

"Get behind me, Satan!" Jesus snapped. "Your vision, Peter, goes no further than *your* hopes. The way forward lies in *God's* hands, and they hold for me a cup to drink and a cross to bear."

Six days had passed. Perhaps Jesus thought about Satan's tempting offer of a road map to glory. Perhaps the image of a wide, short road, smoothed by angel's hands, and not littered with bitter cups drained to their dregs, figured into his prayers. Perhaps the disciples, not daring to speak out loud of alternate routes and detours, nevertheless scoped them out in their minds and in whispered conversations.

Then Jesus took his three most trusted disciples up the mountain with him. From Mt. Tabor, many roads were visible. You could gaze from its heights to Jerusalem and the Dead Sea, a hundred miles away. But Jesus brought them there so that spiritual, not physical geography would be made clear. He stood before them - and changed. Or rather, that which had always been within him from before the world's creation - "the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ," as St. Paul put it - shone through his human flesh. There on the mountain, the eternal Son stood before his Father, and was seen by three awestruck disciples.

Beside him, shining with God's glory stood Moses the Lawgiver and Elijah the Prophet. The history of God's people, embodied in these two figures, bore witness to the path chosen by the Son of God.

For the radiance from his inmost being shone upon the path on which his feet already stood. The cloud veiling his heavenly Father's face overshadowed Jesus, his path and his companions. The Father's voice thundered from that cloud, confirming that this and none other was the right path. "This is my Son, the Beloved. *Listen to him.*"

This path and this choice were foreseen from the depths of eternity before the world and humankind was spoken into being. This path, downward from the radiant Trinity's blessed life, to frail human flesh, to a cross and tomb and depths of hell - *this* path was seen and

chosen by Jesus in love and obedience. This moment of revelation on a snowy mountain peak was a glimpse of God the Son's eternal glory - with one exception. Forever after, because of this path, those whom he guides to his Father's house will see him with wounds still visible in hands, feet and side. The only way forward to the heaven Peter had glimpsed was through the hell Jesus willingly dared for our sake.

Peter was a changed man after this event. Years later in Rome, he looked back to the Mountain of Transfiguration as a touchstone for the faith. *This* was the Lord whom the fledgling church could follow confidently into prison cells and gladiator arenas. *This* was the Lord who transformed even a criminal's death into the gateway of eternal life. *This radiant Jesus* promised to come again, with transfiguring power in his nail-scarred hands, to raise sinful, broken lives to eternal fellowship with himself and his Father through the power of the Spirit. *This* was the Lord whose choice and path promises that *no* path of ours, *no* road we wander down, is too dark, winding, dangerous or remote for his love to find us and lead us safely home.

And this is the Lord who bids *us* follow his path: the path of obedient love for his heavenly Father; a path of self-forgetting love for our neighbor. The world's logic and our fears and doubts scream for a different path, one that's wide, paved with good intentions, smoothed by self-preservation, and well-lit by success. But Jesus lights our true

path, and shows us a way forward through life's deathly shadows, slowly and stepwise. The promise of our baptism into his death and resurrection encourages us forward: Yes, you too are God's beloved child. Listen to your Brother. He will keep you safe and guide you well.

When the vision and voice ended, the disciples *saw nothing at all, except Jesus only*. And *that's* the real reason the Church celebrates this event. *Can you imagine what your life would be like, if in every moment of fear, despair, confusion, anger or sadness, you resolved to interpret it through Jesus only? Can you imagine what your relationship to other people would be like, if you saw them through Jesus only? Can you imagine how you would speak and what priorities you would set, if your decisions were shaped by listening to Jesus only? Can you imagine living your life and facing your death with every step of that path lit by the brilliance of Jesus' forgiveness and strong saving love only?*

Nothing else can be that transformative but Jesus only. *That's* why he turned on his brights. *That's* why the disciples were told, "This is my beloved Son; listen to *Him!*" *That's* why the greatest thing in life is to see nothing except Jesus only - or better, to see everything through Jesus only. God grant that we may so live in the radiance of Jesus' love that our lives are transformed by him and our paths lit by him. God grant that we should at last remain with him, and gaze unafraid upon the beauty of his face forever. Amen.