

## *Until the Morning Star Rises in Your Hearts*

A Sermon by *the Rev. Dr. Joseph David Stinson*,  
Glen Ridge Congregational Church, Glen Ridge, New Jersey,  
*Preached on Transfiguration, (6Mar), 2011.*

Text: 2Peter1:19

“You will do well to pay attention to this as to a lamp shining in a dark place,  
until the day dawns and the morning star arises in your hearts.”

Peter, James and John went up a mountain with Jesus after Peter’s first confession that he believed Jesus was the Messiah.<sup>1</sup> On the mountain top, the three disciples saw Jesus transfigured before them: his face and clothing became dazzlingly bright with unearthly light. They saw him talking with the two great figures of the Old Testament, Moses and Elijah. A cloud enveloped them and they heard a voice say, “*This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased; listen to him.*”<sup>2</sup> This event became one of the major festivals of the church year until modern times. Why do you think that was? For one thing it symbolically connected the Old and the New Testaments. Moses and Elijah, representing the Law and the Prophets, pointed to Jesus. In another way of looking, Jesus also pointed back to the importance of Moses and Elijah. Perhaps more importantly, the church believed the event confirmed Jesus’ divinity.

This story is ethereal. It is odd by almost any modern standard. Today we believe the way to find the truth is by doubting everything. We don’t believe in enchantment—all must be rational. The Transfiguration is presented as a revelation. We might say it is ‘spiritual’ as opposed to ‘real.’ Did they see Moses and Elijah, two figures long dead? Did they see Jesus’ face and garments glow with divine power? We approach the story by asking if it really happened this way or only *seemed* to happen. A generation after the gospel account, another New Testament writer, perhaps a protégé of St. Peter, wrote a letter called *Second Peter*, and in it he described the experience of the Transfiguration again. He wrote, “For we did not follow cleverly devised myths when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eyewitnesses of his majesty.”<sup>3</sup> This implies that there were already some who doubted it had happened! This writer described the experience, the voice they heard and referred to the event as ‘a prophetic word’ to which the church ought well ‘to pay attention to’ ‘as a lamp shining in a dark place.’<sup>4</sup> The author then wrote something that appears to be addressed to us as we dissect the text in the way I’ve been doing: “First of all you must understand this, that no prophecy of

---

<sup>1</sup> Matthew 16:16.

<sup>2</sup> Matthew 17:2-5.

<sup>3</sup> 2Peter 1:16.

<sup>4</sup> 2Peter 1:19.

scripture is a matter of one's own interpretation, because no prophecy ever came by human will, but men and women moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God."<sup>5</sup>

Let me digress a bit before I come around to the point I want to make to you. My friend Nathan Solomon wrote me an email this week from Marjah in Afghanistan where he serves as a chaplain to Marines. His wife Tonya told him a few Sundays ago what their four year old son had said in church. (By coincidence the son's name is Elijah.) The preacher that morning spoke about anger in the sermon, about how we should learn to control our anger and not let it control us. Elijah nudged his mother and said, "Mommy, isn't that something? God says the same thing the Jedi say!"

I am reading Sarah Ruden's wonderful new translation of Vergil's *The Aeneid*.<sup>6</sup> I have been struck several times about how prophecies move that story along. Aeneas was a Trojan hero. As the Trojan horse came into Troy and allowed the Greeks to overtake the city, Aeneas and his family and a few others escaped. It had been prophesied he would come to Italy and his descendants would found Rome. At several points he could have stopped as he made his way from Asia Minor through the Mediterranean. But he kept going because of the prophecy. Prophecies of the gods are alluded to in several additional places in Vergil's story.<sup>7</sup>

A few weeks ago in a sermon I referred to an interesting new phenomenon: how prophecies like this, while largely foreign to our way of thinking, are increasingly common in much of the literature and movies our young people are fascinated by. *The Star Wars* sagas of Steven Spielberg and J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* books come to mind. In such stories prophecies are necessary to plot. Nor can the New Testament be understood without awareness that much in Jesus' life fulfills Old Testament prophecies. In this text today, the line from which my title is taken is a case in point. It is in the 2Peter reading:

And we have the prophetic word made more sure. You will do well to pay attention to this as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts.<sup>8</sup>

When I read that line while preparing the sermon, I wondered about that morning star. The day this happened was a day when the sky was clear. That very morning I had gone outside while still dark to collect the newspaper on the front lawn. As I walked down the sidewalk the morning star shone brightly in the eastern sky. It is a striking symbol and would have seemed more so to Biblical people who were much more attentive to such phenomena than we. Later as I read the passage, the morning star jumped out at me. The first thing I thought of was Balaam's prophecy in Numbers. He was a non-Hebrew, hired by a Gentile king to curse God's chosen people.

---

<sup>5</sup> 2Peter 1:20.

<sup>6</sup> Vergil *The Aeneid*. Translated by Sarah Ruden. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008)

<sup>7</sup> Vergil, *op cit*. For example, the oracle of Latinus' daughter's marriage to a foreigner, 145-6..

<sup>8</sup> 2Peter 1:16.

Instead he blessed them, and in his oracle he prophesied: “*a star shall come forth out of Jacob.*”<sup>9</sup> The star was interpreted to refer to a king like David, or, later, to the Messiah. If you read it in Numbers, it is just one line in a longer oracle, seemingly having nothing to do with kings, much less messiahs. But that is the way such things work. One day long after Balaam uttered it a rabbi interpreted the line anew and thereafter it came to be read as a prediction of the coming Messiah.

A star does have a role in the nativity of Jesus: the star that brought the Magi.<sup>10</sup> I was once told that these Persian sages practiced astrology. The constellation we know of as Leo was associated with the Hebrews. In studying the heavens a planet appeared anew in the lion’s constellation. The Magi assumed this meant a new king had been born to the Jewish people. It did not ‘guide them’ as the carol *The First Nowell* implies. Rather they went to Jerusalem to pay their respects because, they assumed, that is where Jewish kings would be found.<sup>11</sup> Since King Herod had not had a child, he consulted his own sages and they pointed him and the three visitors to a prophecy in the book of Micah.<sup>12</sup> The prophet Micah, they told the visitors had predicted the Messiah-King would be born in Bethlehem, the City of David.<sup>13</sup>

Perhaps a hundred years later the author of *Second Peter* wrote about the morning star rising in your heart, and by then Christ had come. The author used the star image in a slightly different manner. Did he mean to tell us the rising star refers to the time Jesus will return at the end of the age? Or did the rising star refer to the moment when Jesus comes into each of our hearts, as we believe in him? Fascinating!

This week that morning, though clear with a new moon, it was quite dark. The morning star, a planet, no doubt, seemed stunningly bright against the blackness. Isn’t that what Peter meant to remind us? When life and history give us so few clues about what we are to do and believe, Jesus gives us direction, “like a lamp shining in a dark place.”<sup>14</sup> Can I explain this to you? No, like most prophecies, it is shrouded in mystery. Though the original disciples did not quite know at first what to make of the Transfiguration in the confusion of their world, three of them did see him in glory, aglow before their eyes. Things got darker yet for them and Jesus, but they did not forget that moment on the mountain. Months later, very early before dawn, some of them also went to the tomb where Jesus had been buried. The Gospel of John tells us it was still dark<sup>15</sup> when they got there and found his body missing. But, then he began to appear to them, ‘like a morning star arisen in their hearts.’

End

Until the Morning Star Rises in Your Hearts. DOC

---

<sup>9</sup> Numbers 24:17.

<sup>10</sup> Matthew 2:2.

<sup>11</sup> Matthew 2:1-3.

<sup>12</sup> Matthew 2:4-6. Quoting Micah 5:2.

<sup>13</sup> Herod took no chances and moved to eliminate all the boy children born in Bethlehem under two years of age, vv. 16-18.

<sup>14</sup> 2Peter 1:19.

<sup>15</sup> John 20:1.