[**Genesis 15:1-12, 17-18**](https://lectionary.library.vanderbilt.edu/texts.php?id=119#hebrew_reading)

[**Psalm 27**](https://lectionary.library.vanderbilt.edu/texts.php?id=119#psalm_reading)

[**Philippians 3:17-4:1**](https://lectionary.library.vanderbilt.edu/texts.php?id=119#epistle_reading)

[**Luke 9:28-36**](https://lectionary.library.vanderbilt.edu/texts.php?id=119#gospel_oth_reading)

Sermon for 3/17.2019

THE SEARCHLIGHT

By Rev. Dr. Don Algeo

One of the many things I've failed to learn very much about during my life is electricity. I do know that if you flip that little switch on the wall beside the door, light will usually appear almost immediately. I know that wires are typically involved, but I'm not even entirely sure about that, because when I pet the cat and then reach for the iron stove, I sometimes get a shock, even though there are no wires present. I'm familiar with the terms electrodes and amperes and voltaic cells in the sense that I've often heard them used, although I'm not sure exactly what they are or how they're all connected with electricity.

Anyway a couple of weeks ago, I decided that one of my projects for this year would be to learn something about electricity, at least the basics. Maybe if I did then I'd be able to handle electricity chores more complicated than changing a light bulb. So I sent online and ordered a book on Basic Electricity.

When the book arrived, I sat down with a real sense of anticipation. Finally I was going to learn what electricity actually is.

Well, you can imagine my surprise and chagrin when I came to this sentence in the very first paragraph: No one actually knows what electricity actually **is.**

Well, I'm still reading the book and learning quite a bit, but what I know now is that I'm not learning what electricity really *is*, I'm not getting at the heart of electricity, so to speak. What I'm learning about electricity is how it works, how to harness and manipulate it, whatever it is.

And if that's true of physical reality, how much more so of moral and religious reality? You hear Protestants arguing with Catholics about whether the bishop of Rome should be the head of Christendom, or Republican and Democrats arguing about income redistribution, or pro-life and pro-choice advocates debating the desirability of abortion rights, and what you have to keep in mind somehow is the distinction between reality and opinions about reality. Reality just is what it is, regardless of what we think about it.

The image I like to use is that our thoughts and beliefs are like mirrors floating above the ocean. They may be more or less distorted or more or less clear, but in any case they have nothing whatsoever to do with what's going on in the ocean below.

Well then, what's a person to do, especially when it comes to the important decisions of how to lead one's life? How do we know that our way of life isn't just a product of all the accidental influences of our upbringing and education and environment, that our lives are in true accord with reality, that we are not just mirrors floating above the ocean, but rather deep sea inhabitants, swimming among and thriving in all the true wonders of the ocean, all that the ocean, and not just its mirror reflection, has to offer?

That's really the lesson of our gospel reading for this morning, I think. Jesus has brought His three closest disciples up onto a mountain to be with Him while He prays. What is He praying about? Well remember, this takes place right after the great event in Caesaria Phillippi, where Peter has acknowledged Jesus to be the Messiah, the son of the living God, and Jesus had then begun to teach them how He must go to Jerusalem to be persecuted and die.

What Jesus was going up on the mountain to pray about was what He always prayed about, to ask God the Father whether this was truly His will, whether the path towards the Cross was the path God wanted Him to take, whether His decision was truly in accord with the reality of God's plan.

And isn't here a lesson for all of us? How many of us, in dealing with the decision of our lives, both large and small, have thought to sincerely seek God's advice? I know I never did that very much until relatively late in life. And even now, all too often I arrive at an opinion or a decision after considering only my own thoughts and needs, and then, if I turn to God at all, it's really more for confirmation rather than guidance. My prayer is basically along the lines of: *God, please bless my efforts*, rather than, *Father, what would you have me do?*

Not so with Jesus. His prayer was always, *What would you have me do? Is this project of mine really also your project?*

And that's surely what Jesus had climbed the mountain to pray about on this occasion. *Is this journey towards the cross truly Your will?*And He brought His disciples with Him to model his own behavior to them. He wanted to show them that seeking God's guidance should always be their first priority, because only by establishing that their plans and projects were in accordance with God's guidance could they be certain that they were in agreement with God's reality, with true reality.

We know from what came after this evening of prayer that God assured Jesus that the way of the Cross was truly God's way. We know that, because that is the way Jesus then followed to the end.

But for this morning, our focus is on what happens to the disciples. A cloud descends on them – the cloud of God's glory that we have met with in many many places throughout the Old Testament – and out of the cloud they hear the very voice of God. And now here's what's important.

God is speaking to them, not to Jesus. Let's read it again.

 "This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!"

None of us has a prayer life, an intimacy with God, like Jesus. We are all of us human, with human frailties. It sounds very pious and preachy, I know, to say “Seek God's will,” but honestly, we've got so many other things on our minds, the bills have to be paid and the sidewalk shoveled, household and professional responsibilities have to be juggled. We can't take time to seek God's will about everything, for goodness sake! And that's just for the routine of life! For the big decisions – what should I do for a living, should I get married, whom should I marry, how should I prioritize by interests, and so on – for these sorts of decisions, if I were to seriously appeal to God for advice, and hear something, how would I know it's God speaking, and not just a voice in my head representing my own desires?

We're not Jesus, we're not Moses or Elijah, we're not one of the prophets, we're not even Billy Graham! How are we supposed to hear and recognize the voice of God?

The answer is the same answer God spoke to the disciples: *Listen to Him*.

Because our human frailties and desires make listening to God, so problematic, God gave us a much simpler way of determining His will, of making sure our lives are in accord with God's own reality. So, why don’t we do just that?  Why don’t we listen to Jesus?

Oh, but that's what I do, we say, and pat ourselves on the back.

But do we really?

Here’s what I think: I think most of us most of the time practice the art of selective listening.  We pick and choose the words we want to hear and gloss over the others.

For example, we nod and smile when Jesus says, “Come to me, all you who labor and are heavily burdened, and I will give you rest.” (Matthew 11:28) Or where he tells his disciples, “I came that they may have life, and may have it abundantly.” (John 10:10) These are the kinds of words we like to hear.  “For God so loved the world, that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish, but have eternal life.” That’s music to our ears.

We listen to Jesus when he says things that are uplifting and spiritual sounding and sufficiently vague, but when he says things that might actually sound like instruction, like guidance, we tend to turn the other ear.

For example, Jesus said, *“Don’t think that I came to send peace on the earth. I didn’t come to send peace, but a sword.”*  He goes on to say, *“He who loves father or mother … (or) son or daughter more than me isn’t worthy of me.”* (Matthew 10:34-37)

Fathers and mothers are not apt to find much comfort in that!

Or how about this in this same chapter 9 of Luke, only a few verses earlier?

*“If anyone desires to come after me,  
let him deny himself, take up his cross,‡ and follow me.  
For whoever desires to save his life will lose it,  
but whoever will lose his life for my sake, the same will save it.”*  
(Luke 9:23-24)

“Lose *your* life?” we say. “Excellent idea. You get to work now, following Jesus. Send me postcards.”

But “Lose *my* life?” Now hold on just a minute. My life is pretty much set in stone. I've got my routines, the things I like and don't like, my priorities all in a row: and honestly, I just don't see much there in need of change!

Well, maybe not. Although it's good to remember that even Paul, when he wrote to the Philippians about this process of becoming like Christ by following His example: *I haven't achieved these things, but I keep pressing on.*

The point is that Christianity, our faith, isn't simply something to be investigated or memorized or applauded: it's a way to be followed, a guide for living.

We're well into the season of Lent, now, and Lent is the season during which our faith emphasizes self-examination. We sometimes think of it as cutting something out of our lives or eating more fish, and those things are fine, if done in the right spirit. But what is the right spirit? It's the spirit of bringing our lives into accord with what Jesus said, with everything He said, not just the things we agree with or the things that that are too vague and general to have any personal application.

So my suggestion for this season would be to take something specific that Christ said and think of it as a searchlight shining on your life. And not just anything, but something hard.

“Do good to those who hate you.” There's an example. When I let the searchlight of that instruction shine on my own life, what do I find? Perhaps not many who literally hate me, but surely there are those who have some sort of negative attitude towards me. Have I gone out of my way to do something kind, something generous, something good to those people?

It's very easy and satisfying for us all to go out of our way to be generous and loving to those who love us back. What's hard is bringing the same enthusiasm to those who don't, who in fact don't even particularly like us. We tend to resent them and shun them, don't we? We feel like we'd be taken advantage of if we were to go out of our way on their behalf, and not even appreciated for our effort!

And yet, that's exactly what Christ instructed us to do: “Do good to those who hate you.” Not, *refrain from doing evil to those who hate you*. Be assertive, be the first, reach out, set your ego on the back burner: Do good to those who hate you.

That's just one example, but you get the idea, and I offer it only because, for what it's worth, having shone the searchlight of Christ's teaching on my own life, that's my personal resolution for this Lenten season.

And so, gracious God, our sermon prayer for this morning is that, in this season of Lent, You help us bring our own lives under examination. We pray that as we read and reflect on Your words that those very words will pierce like searchlights through the cloudiness of our own routines and habits and ways of thinking, and will illuminate the way into a clearer and better world, the world of Your own living reality, We ask for strength and nourishment in following that way, because it is the Way of Christ, in whose name we pray.