

Westminster Presbyterian Church + 533 S. Walnut St. + Springfield, IL 62704

Dr. Lonnie H. Lee
February 14, 2010

Transfigured Eyes
Luke 9:29

No one was more surprised than Abraham Lincoln when his series of debates with Stephen A. Douglas made him a national figure in American politics. Lincoln always believed that his lack of formal education would prevent him from achieving very much in politics. In October of 1859 a prominent group of New York Republicans invited Lincoln to address an open meeting in that city in February of the next year. With the Republican national convention also looming in the following year, this was clearly Lincoln's one big chance to establish his credentials as a serious contender for the presidency. Lincoln prepared for this speech more carefully than he had for any speech he had previously given. Hoping to look the part, he purchased a \$100 suit for the occasion and checked into the regal Astor House Hotel when he arrived in New York on February 25, 1860.

Allen Guelzo has described this career changing night for Lincoln in these words:

The weather turned foul the night of the speech, and snow descended on New York. For the fifteen hundred Republicans who braved the storm to fill the Cooper Union, the atmosphere inside the hall also chilled as William Cullen Bryant introduced what looked to New York eyes like "something weird, rough, and uncultivated." Even in the best broadcloth suit, Lincoln still looked gawky and clumsy, and his "peculiarly high-keyed voice" (almost squeaky with self-consciousness) and Midwestern twang grated embarrassingly on New Yorkers, who twisted uncomfortably in their seats and wondered how this giraffe from the prairies had even given five minutes' trouble to Stephen A. Douglas...

But by the end of Lincoln's speech his sophisticated listeners were caught up in the power of his rhetoric and his ideas. Guelzo went on to describe the response of the crowd in this way:

By now, Lincoln "held the vast meeting spell-bound," and when he concluded with a vivid exhortation... the "house broke out in wild and prolonged enthusiasm." One listener said, "When I came out of the hall, my face glowing with excitement and my frame all aquiver, a friend, with his eyes aglow asked me what I thought of Abe Lincoln... I said 'He's the greatest man since St. Paul'." The next morning the New York Tribune announced that "no man ever before made such an impression on his first appeal to a New York audience." (Allen Guelzo, *Abraham Lincoln: Redeemer President*, pages 236-239).

One reporter noticed that Lincoln's transformation from an awkward country bumpkin began when he moved beyond the opening pleasantries to the central affirmation that slavery was morally wrong. It was then that the reporter saw Lincoln's "face light with an inward fire (Guelzo, page 237)." From that moment on the people in the audience moved beyond their New York eyes to see Lincoln in a different way.

The disciples of Jesus have a similar experience in the ninth chapter of the gospel of Luke. There we read that Jesus takes Peter, James, and John with him to the top of the mountain to pray.

While Jesus is praying they notice a change in the appearance of his face. They are dazzled by the light that is reflected from him. In this moment their perception of Jesus is transformed. This mountaintop experience is commonly called the transfiguration of Jesus. It would be more accurate theologically to call it the transfiguration of the disciples' eyes. From this moment on they have a new capacity to see.

We are able to see because light breaks open when it shines on objects. Light reflects, refracts, and absorbs in ways that allow us to discern color, shapes, and movement. We typically see only a tiny fraction of the light that God has created through the visible spectrum that is open to us. At the same time we often assume that only what we see truly exists. When Jesus takes the disciples to the top of the mountain he doesn't change his form or shape. He simply gives the disciples the gift of seeing him as God sees him. A much larger spectrum of light is suddenly open to the disciples. Instead of reflecting the blues, reds, and yellows of the visible spectrum, Jesus reflects the glorious spectrum of God and shows himself to be luminous. This light is dazzling and transfigures their eyes (Adam Thomas, *Christian Century*, February 9, 2010, page 18).

The first response of the disciples to the gift they have been given is to propose building a monument to memorialize the event. But Jesus does not support this proposal. The purpose of this experience is to teach the disciples how to use their transfigured eyes. For at the heart of God's glorious spectrum is the truth that every human being is precious. We are all created in the image of God. An injustice against one ultimately damages all of us. The disciples are to move beyond the eyes of their culture to see their fellow human beings as God sees. We, too, are called to live by that glorious spectrum.