

## **Sermon 080617**

### **The Light of World**

If you haven't looked at the back of your service leaflet this morning, please do so.

The old van belched out a trail of black diesel smoke as it sped along Israel Highway 65 toward the Arab village of Daburiya, at the foot of Mt. Tabor. Ten-year-old Tariq was crouched on a wooden bench, crammed in the back of the dilapidated old vehicle along with 10 other children. Omar, the driver squinted through a cloud of cigarette smoke as the sun began appearing over the edge of the plain of Jezreel. There were no windows in the back of the van, but through the front windshield, Tariq could see the hump of Mt. Tabor rising up in front of them. Tariq rubbed the sleep from his eyes and instinctively reached behind him to make sure his backpack full of postcards was still there. This could be a tough day; he needed to sell twenty dollars worth of postcards to make his quota. If he sold less than twenty dollars, there would be no dinner plus he was likely to get abuse from Omar who was also the children's handler. The rumor among the children was that there was a Russian cruise ship docked at Haifa, and that meant that today there would be busload after busload of Russian tourists. That was bad news because in Tariq's experience, the Russians were not big spenders like the Americans.

The van pulled up in front of the visitors' center, and Tariq and the other children filed solemnly around to the back of the building. Amara, Omar's girlfriend and assistant, began helping the boys put on their native Arab dress. As she adjusted Tariq's keffiyeh, the Arab headdress, he thought that she was probably as lazy and

stupid as Omar. The Israeli National Parks warden came by, and Omar flashed his vendor ID badge that authorized him to sell souvenirs at the visitors' center. Omar did a quick inspection of the boys to make sure they were ready for the 12-hour day. There was only one way to describe these children; they were cute. Tariq, with his big, brown eyes, and winning smile was the cutest of the cute. Next, he needed to find the best location for sales. Tariq definitely didn't like to get in the feeding frenzy that took place as the tourists got off the bus. He decided to stand near the toilets where he could get individual attention.

It was nearly 8:00 AM, opening time for the visitors' center, and the taxis used to ferry visitors to the top of the mountain began rolling in. Tariq had never been to the mountaintop and had no idea what was up there, but if he ever got the chance to go up, it certainly wouldn't be in one of those deathtraps. Tariq began arranging his postcards, and the first one in the stack was the picture of a young man, dressed in a white robe, standing with outstretched arms, and of all things he was glowing. His body was radiating beams of light. The caption at the top of the card read "The Mount of the Transfiguration. Jesus, the light of the world." Tariq's English was pretty good, but he had no idea what that meant. *Transfiguration*. That's a big word. Tariq had heard of Jesus. He knew that he was a Jew, but how could he light up the world? Oh, well, his job was to sell the postcards, not explain them.

It was now 8 o'clock and the tour buses began rolling in. As the tourists exiting the bus began making their way past Tariq's colleagues who were wildly waving their

postcards and screaming, "Postcards, postcards, eight for a dollar," Tariq calmly studied, not the tourists' faces, but their feet. "Sure enough," he thought. "These are Russians." Tariq had learned long ago that the best way to tell a person's nationality is by looking at his or her shoes. These travelers' shoes were made of a cheap looking, plastic type material. Most of the American visitors wear expensive, brand-name running shoes. Tariq approached his first prospective customer. "Hello, beautiful lady. Eight postcards for one dollar." She gave him a blank stare. "Doesn't speak English." A man and woman came by and Tariq said, "You are a beautiful lady, and if you buy my postcards your husband will think you are even more beautiful." No response. And so it went all day.

By three o'clock, the cheese crackers that Omar had passed out for lunch were long forgotten. Tariq was thirsty, hungry, tired, and discouraged. There was no way that he would make his quota. He needed to get out of the heat, so he crouched behind a departing taxi and slipped off into the woods. It was much cooler here in the forest, and Tariq walked slowly up the hill along an old animal trail. Eventually, the trail ended at some steps that extended up the mountain as far as the eye could see.

Without thinking, Tariq began climbing the steps...and climbing and climbing and climbing. He came to a water fountain, and as he drank the cool water, he heard the sound of the taxis, racing up and down Mt. Tabor loaded with tourists. He wondered briefly if Omar would come after him, and then quickly put that thought out of his mind. He had come this far so he might as well see what was on the top of the Mount of the Transfiguration.

The shadows were now getting longer, and the sun was sinking slowly in the west. It had gotten very quiet; Tariq no longer heard the sound of the old taxis. Tariq continued climbing the steps until they finally ended at a paved road. He followed the road toward the crest of the hill, through an iron gate, through a beautiful garden, toward a large church. It was now getting dark, but Tariq had no trouble seeing because of the full moon. As he approached the church he saw that the doors were open, and a warm yellow light was visible inside. He could barely make out some men's voices chanting, "O gracious light, pure brightness of the everliving Father in heaven; O Jesus Christ holy and blessed..." There was some singing and then silence. Tariq ducked behind a statue as men dressed in brown robes began filing out of the church toward one of the large buildings.

Tariq waited until they were all gone and then continued on toward the entrance to the church. The lights in the church were still on so Tariq moved cautiously inside. He walked across the cool marble through an entry hall and then the room opened up. It was huge. Tariq looked up at the ceiling and almost fell over. There was the man from the postcard. He was in the same pose, arms outstretched and light radiating from his white robe, and the mosaic was so realistic that it seemed as if the man were actually present in the church. There were two other men who appeared to be floating above each of the man's shoulders, and three men who were kneeling on the ground in a position of worship. Wow! So this is the Mount of the

Transfiguration. Tariq almost jumped out of his skin as he felt a gentle tap on his shoulder.

It was one of the men in the brown robes who said, "Hello, son. May I be of some service. I am Fr. John, the sacristan for the Church of the Transfiguration." Tariq was too shocked to even speak. Fr. John smiled and said, "Don't be ashamed. This mosaic of Jesus affects many people this way. Do you know the story of the Transfiguration?" Still unable to speak, Tariq shook his head in the negative. Fr. John said, "Turn around and look up at the mosaic while I tell you about the Transfiguration. *Jesus took with him Peter and John and James, and went up on the mountain to pray. These were disciples of Jesus who seemed to be the closest to him. And while he was praying, the appearance of his face changed, and his clothes became dazzling white.* Jesus does not merely reflect the brightness of divine glory. He is the brightness of divine glory. Jesus is the light of the world. He was with God in the beginning when he created light by his Word and Jesus is the Word. God called the light good, and that is why we say that Jesus is the light of the world."

*"Suddenly they saw two men, Moses and Elijah, talking to him. They appeared in glory and were speaking of his departure, which he was about to accomplish at Jerusalem.*

These are the two men standing on either side of Jesus. See, Moses is holding a stone tablet that represents the Law and Elijah is holding a scroll that represents the words of the prophets. They were encouraging Jesus as he was about to face his crucifixion in Jerusalem. *Now Peter and his companions were weighed down with*

*sleep; but since they had stayed awake, they saw his glory and the two men who stood with him. Just as they were leaving him, Peter said to Jesus, 'Master, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah'—not knowing what he said. While he was saying this, a cloud came and overshadowed them; and they were terrified as they entered the cloud. Then from the cloud came a voice that said, 'This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!' When the voice had spoken, Jesus was found alone. And they kept silent and in those days told no one any of the things they had seen. So the Transfiguration was God confirming the glory of Christ. Jesus was revealed in light to show that he is the light. That is the story of the Transfiguration."*

Fr. John smiled and said, "Now young man. What about you? Did you get separated from your group? What is your name?"

"My name is Tariq, and I sell postcards at the Visitors' Center. Would you like to buy some? I will make you a special deal – eight for a dollar."

"No, thank you. Where do you live? Someone must be terribly worried about you."

"My parents are at work and won't be home until late tonight. Omar, my boss will be furious. He will tan my hide when he finds me."

"You look hungry and thirsty. Come with me."

Tariq followed Fr. John through the main doors of the church, through the garden, to the large building. They walked into the biggest kitchen Tariq had ever seen, and

they were greeted by a large woman dressed in brown, like Fr. John, and with a white scarf on her head. "This is Sister Maria. She will get you something to eat and drink while I make a phone call." The nun told Tariq to have a seat, and then gave him a plate of bread, cheese, and a piece of cold chicken. It was the best food that he had ever tasted, and the cold milk was fabulous. Tariq noticed the large crucifix on the kitchen wall and asked, "Is that Jesus nailed to that cross?"

"Yes."

"Is he dead?"

"Yes."

"Why did he have to die?"

"The short answer is that he died on the Cross because God loves you. The Bible says that God gave his only begotten Son so that all who believe in him might not perish, but have eternal life. Jesus Christ defeated death once and for all, and because God raised him from the dead, we too shall be raised. When God created the world everything was good, and the first people, Adam and Eve, lived a perfect life in the Garden of Eden, but they rebelled against God. This was the original sin and it has been passed down through the centuries to all mankind, including you and me. God is completely holy and cannot tolerate sin. God sent his only son to pay the price for our sin, to take our punishment. If you were the only person in the world, Jesus would have died on that cross for you."

As Tariq was trying to absorb all of that, Fr. John came back into the kitchen. “Good news, Tariq. I called the director of the Visitors’ Center and told him about your situation. He thinks that it would be best if you spend the night with us. We have a guesthouse where we can put you up. The director spoke to your boss, Omar, and told him to let your parents know where you are. He also let Omar know that if you are in any way punished, he will lose his vendor’s license for Mt. Tabor Visitors’ Center. Follow me now, and I will take you to the guesthouse.”

Fr. John took out a large flashlight, and shined it on the path as Tariq followed him. Tariq made a little joke, “is that the light of Christ?” Fr. John laughed, “That is closer to the truth than you might think. Just as the flashlight guides us through the darkness to the guesthouse, the light of Christ guides us through a world that contains much sin and darkness to a life filled with goodness, truth, and peace. Those who follow Jesus will not walk in darkness, but become sons of light.” Fr. John really had Tariq’s attention now. Tariq asked, “How does a person become one of Christ’s followers?”

“Well, Christ finished his work by dying on the Cross, that is certain. Some people think that through his death they are automatically saved, but that is not true. God created us with free will, and he doesn’t force anything on us. God offers us salvation, but in turn we must accept it. There are essentially three steps in becoming a follower of Christ or a Christian. 1. A person must acknowledge themselves to be a sinner in God’s sight. The Bible says that all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. 2. A person must believe. They must believe that Jesus died

on the Cross to be the very Savior that they need. 3. Then the person must come to Jesus and ask him to be their personal Lord and Savior.”

“Well, here is your room. Just push the button beside the bed if you need anything. You are a good boy, and I have enjoyed our evening together. I’ll take you back down the mountain in the morning to meet your group, and I will be checking in with you from time to time.” Father John handed Tariq a small card and said, “Here is a prayer that I would like for you to read and think about. Then we can have another talk. God Bless you my child.”

Tariq crawled in between the soft, cool sheets and put his head on the soft pillow. He had never slept by himself before and certainly never in a bed like this. Before he turned off the bed lamp he looked at the card Fr. John had given him. It read:

*Lord Jesus Christ,*

*I am sorry for the things I have done wrong in my life. (Take a few moments to ask His forgiveness for anything particular that is on your conscience.) Please forgive me. I now turn from everything that I know is wrong.*

*Thank you that you died on the Cross for me so that I could be forgiven and set free.*

*Thank you that you offer me forgiveness and the gift of Your Spirit. I now receive that gift.*

*Please come into my life by your Holy Spirit to be with me forever.*

*Thank you, Lord Jesus. Amen.*

Tariq, turned off the light just as the full moon descended to the point where the beams radiated into the room. Tariq looked at the crucifix that was on the wall opposite the window. Jesus on the Cross was shining brilliantly. Tariq thought to himself, "Jesus is still transfigured. The light of Christ. I have seen it tonight."

I am sure that you know that this story didn't actually happen, but I think it could have. Jesus is the light of the world, and I pray that he will powerfully, and fully reveal himself to the Muslim world, especially to children like Tariq. In conclusion let us pray this prayer for mission from Morning Prayer.

O God, you have made of one blood all the peoples of the earth, and sent your blessed Son to preach peace to those who are far off and to those who are near: Grant that people everywhere may seek after you and find you; bring the nations into your fold; pour out your Spirit upon all flesh; and hasten the coming of your kingdom; through Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen.*