

"Gaslighting"

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February 26, 2017

¹⁶For we did not follow cleverly devised myths when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we had been eyewitnesses of his majesty. ¹⁷For he received honor and glory from God the Father when that voice was conveyed to him by the Majestic Glory, saying, "This is my Son, my Beloved, with whom I am well pleased." ¹⁸We ourselves heard this voice come from heaven, while we were with him on the holy mountain.

¹⁹So we have the prophetic message more fully confirmed. You will do well to be attentive to this as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts. ²⁰First of all you must understand this, that no prophecy of scripture is a matter of one's own interpretation, ²¹because no prophecy ever came by human will, but men and women moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God.
(2 Peter 1:16-21)

In the second epistle of Peter, one gets the feeling that the flame of Christianity is flickering. The light of the church is being challenged by false prophets and teachers, clever saboteurs who are injecting doubts and "destructive opinions" into the minds of believers. The author of the book is concerned that these negative thoughts are slowly but steadily breaking down the confidence of the Christian mind like the drip-drip-drip of Chinese water torture. "*Many will follow their licentious ways,*" he warns, "*and because of these teachers the way of truth will be maligned... in their greed they will exploit you with deceptive words*" (2 Peter 2:2-3).

This text comes to us on this Sunday of the Transfiguration because one of the lies these false teachers were spreading related to that event, the hour when Jesus was transfigured before Peter, James and John, suddenly appearing in dazzling white with a vision of Moses and Elijah. As the church wrestled with the meaning of the Transfiguration, it came to be primarily understood as evidence of Jesus' eventual return in the final judgment. This claim was one of the main targets of the false teachers. "Those old stories are just myths and fables," they would say. "Your god was never really here, and your friend Jesus is not coming back."¹ Against these subversive assaults, this letter, purporting to be from Peter himself, means to remind the church that the story of the Transfiguration is not a myth or fable, but something that was actually seen and related by three trustworthy eyewitnesses. "We do not speak to you of cleverly devised myths," the author writes. "Remember that we were on the mountain. We saw the Lord, and we actually heard God's voice say, '*This is my Son, my Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.*'"

Until very recently, I had never heard the term "gaslighting," but when it kept appearing in TV reports and online news, I finally looked it up. I found that "gaslighting" is a form of psychological abuse that purposefully erodes the mental confidence of the victim. With a steady stream of lies, denials, misdirections and contradictions, a gaslighter causes the victim to question his or her own perceptions and judgments.² Eventually, the victim becomes completely dependent upon the abuser, tacitly accepting the view of reality that the

¹ Pheme Perkins. "Exegetical Perspective" on 2 Peter 1:16-21, in *Feasting on the Word, Year A, Volume 1*, David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, Editors. Louisville: Westminster John Knox (2010), p. 449.

² <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gaslighting>

manipulator seeks to impose.³ As Lutheran minister Leah Schade has said, the purpose of a gaslighter is to make it seem that what we know to be true is not true.⁴

The term was first made popular by the 1944 movie "Gaslight," starring Ingrid Bergman. Her character Paula is swept off her feet by Gregory, a man whose real purpose in marrying her was to get back into the house previously owned by Paula's aunt. Gregory had murdered the aunt in an attempt to steal some priceless jewelry, but his heist had been interrupted before he could find the prize. Paula, who agrees to move back into the house with her new husband, begins to notice strange things happening. Gregory hides things and accuses Paula of stealing them. He pretends that they have had conversations they never had. Day by day, he slowly loosens her grip on reality with his lies and manipulations.

The movie gets its title from one of the most frequent lies he tells to her. Each night, when Paula believes her husband has gone out, he sneaks up into the attic to search for the jewels. And each evening, Paula notices that the lights in the house dim. She cannot explain why. Even though she can plainly see the flame of the lights go down, Gregory tells her she is just imagining it. It is a bald-faced lie, because Gregory knows that the lights are dimming. He knows that the lamps he is turning on in the attic are diverting gas away from the lights throughout the rest of the house, reducing their flames. He knows that what she is seeing is true. Poor Paula, however, is bullied -- or "gaslighted" -- into accepting that what she knows to be true is not true.

The writer of Second Peter does not want the church to be gaslighted. He knows that certain voices are creating doubt. He knows that certain influences are causing believers to question what they have known to be true. And he wants the church to ignore those voices -- to hold fast to the reality that God is real, that God is present in the world, that God cares what happens to us, and -- perhaps most importantly -- that God is coming back, so that where God is, we might be also. So this author -- whether it is really the apostle Peter or not -- offers the story that we all know, and the experience that we all share, as a lamp unto our feet and a light unto our path. This author reminds us all, as the church, that the only way to resist the whispered voices that it is all a myth, is to reaffirm our trust in the things that we have seen, the things that we have felt, and the experiences that we have shared as the church.

I now know pretty well what gaslighting is, and I think you do, too. It is a reality in our world, because there are voices out there denying reality in the name of ideology or self-interest. As a people who are called to value the truth, speak the truth and defend the truth, we are given on this Transfiguration Sunday an ancient word of scripture that lights a lamp in our darkness in several ways.

First, this scripture reminds us to trust our instincts. For example, it was 80 degrees in Concord yesterday. It is February. We are an Earth Care congregation, which means that we believe it is important to pay attention to such things. Do not doubt your heart. Do not doubt your senses. Do not doubt what you can plainly see and feel. Do not doubt the 97 percent of scientists who say that we, as a human race, are threatening the health of our planet in the ways we are living.⁵

Secondly, this scripture reminds us to trust what we have experienced in the church about the reality of Christ's presence in this world. On Friday, a group of elders and leaders

³ "The Effects of Gaslighting in Narcissistic Victim Syndrome," <http://narcissisticbehavior.net>, Feb. 25, 2017.

⁴ <http://ecopreacher.blogspot.com/2017/01/gaslighting-in-age-of-trump-tips-for.html>

⁵ "97 percent of scientists say man-made climate change is real," <http://content.usatoday.com>, Feb. 25, 2017.

from our church gathered for a planning retreat, and were reminded that Christ is not someone we just carry around in our hearts like luggage. We were reminded that Christ is alive, that Christ is present here, not in a disembodied theoretical way, but with a real presence and personality that is seated beside you right now on your pew. Christ is at work in this place right now, guiding us, encouraging us, leading us and using us. He is not a myth. He is not a fable. And we know that is true because we have experienced him -- experienced his power and his grace and his presence... here... together... in this community. I have heard you talk about it with passion and the deepest gratitude -- families in grief and crisis who have experienced the love of Christ in the care they have received from this church... men and women who have been moved and inspired by the Holy Spirit in worship, right here. This scripture reminds us to trust those experiences, and to hold onto the power of that knowledge, because it will preserve and protect us against the steady drip of those who say it is all a myth... that God was never really here... and our savior Jesus is not really coming back.

The reality of life, and the reality of discipleship, is that the light of our faith will periodically dim and strengthen. Our lamps will ebb and flow, weaken and surge. In the seasons of life and faith, the firmness of our grip on the truth will fluctuate. But in strong times and in weak ones, God calls us to remember those things that we have known, not just because they have been told to us, but because we have felt them and experienced them for ourselves as truth. We are called to hold fast to these experiences of God's power and presence and glory, for these things will always light a path for us in the darkness. *"You will do well to be attentive to this,"* scripture says, *"as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts."*

In the end, Paula regains her strength and confidence for one reason, and one reason only. A sympathetic person comes alongside her. He arrives at just the right time -- to listen to her, to believe her, to confirm that the things she is seeing and believing are in fact real. He helps her to see that the lies that are being told to her really are lies, that the things she has thought to be true really have been true all along. With his help, Paula learns once more to rely upon her senses, to cherish her memories, and to have faith in herself.

In the final scene of the movie, when the danger is finally past, and the truth is once again the truth, Paula looks out into the darkness with this man who has saved and liberated her from her tormentor. Though her immediate peril is ended, the darkness has not yet dissipated. *"This night will be a long night,"* she says.

"But it will end," the man says. *"It's [already] starting to clear. In the morning, when the sun rises, sometimes it's hard to believe there ever was a night. You'll find that, too."*⁶

Scripture gives us the same assurance. The gaslight may dim and surge, the light may ebb and flow, but God's presence never fades. God is present here, in power and in truth. The promise of the gospel is that what you hope to be true, what you have felt to be true, really is true.

Thanks be to God. **Amen.**

⁶ *Gaslight*, directed by George Cukor (1944; Culver City, CA: MGM).