

Five Life Lessons from the Mysteries of Light
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“If you fall asleep while praying the rosary, the angels will finish for you,” or so the sisters at my Catholic grade school told me. Thus started a long tradition of falling asleep while praying the rosary. The prayers chased away any fears that awaited me in the dark. I fell asleep confident that the angels would carry my prayers to their rightful conclusion. I was so confident that when I prepared “spiritual bouquets” for family members as gifts (an assortment of prayers said and Masses attended on behalf of someone else), I included these sleep induced rosaries in the list, thereby creating a much more impressive list of prayers.

As an adult I continued the practice, praying the rosary when awoken in the middle of the night by worries. I coordinated my devotions with the Church liturgical calendar, praying the joyful mysteries during Advent and Christmas, the sorrowful during Lent, and the glorious during Easter. The problem with this system was: what to do about the rest of the year, that long stretch of time the Church calls Ordinary Time?

With the addition of the mysteries of light by Pope John Paul II in 2002, this problem was solved. Since that time I’ve had ample opportunity to pray these mysteries and reflect on them. The vast majority of our life is spent in doing the ordinary, everyday activities that make up a lifetime: cooking, cleaning, working, eating, sleeping. I’ve discovered these mysteries truly are a source of light to get us through life’s ordinary challenges. They offer five important, easy-to-learn lessons to help us stay our spiritual course.

The Baptism of the Lord

Know who you and whose you are. In my former role as chaplain at a retirement community, I preached each Sunday using the common Lectionary. The baptism of Jesus would come up every year, year after year, in each of the gospels. “*Jesus’ baptism again.*” I would think, “*What can I say that I haven’t already said or that others more gifted than I haven’t said?*” Yet each year I discovered more.

Over time, the significance of this passage has sunk deep into my soul. It speaks of the very heart of Jesus’ identity as God’s son. “You are my beloved Son,” God tells Jesus. “In you I am well pleased.” Who doesn’t crave such words of affirmation from a parent? To know not only that you are loved, but that your parents are proud of you. Here is God letting Jesus know, “I’m proud of you. You are a good son.” With that affirmation Jesus has the strength to go forth and do the Father’s will.

God isn’t just saying this to Jesus. God is saying this to all of God’s children, all who came before, all who will come after us. Before we can do anything in this life, we need to know who we are and “whose” we are. Without this, we are lost adrift in a world of uncertainty and

change. With it, we have what we need to weather the vagaries of chance, life's misfortunes as well as life's fortunes.

God doesn't send us out into this world unequipped for the dangers that await us. God equips us with his love and affirmation. With the confidence that comes from this we can move on to the next mystery.

The Wedding at Cana

We don't have to go it alone. In our society where divorce is rampant, marriage is a risky business. As someone who has been through a divorce, I find myself skittish at the prospect of remarriage. Wouldn't it be a whole lot less messy if we just lived together? No need to work out joint finances, go through the hassle of changing documents to reflect your marriage, and if it doesn't work out, you can just leave, no messy divorce or legal papers to file.

Marriage when you are older is different from marriage in your twenties. The reality of one of us dying, leaving the other alone, is so much closer. The possibility of losing life savings through medical bills for either of us and leaving the other with nothing to live on is frightening. Better to live together and keep the finances separate as many people who are older do. Yet each night as I pray the mysteries of light I am reminded of the sacredness of marriage and I ask myself, what would God have me do?

A wedding is two families, joining together within a community. For those who may choose to live as a single, that doesn't mean you have to go it alone. There are other people who become family to us. Wedding celebrations during Jesus' time involved the whole village. Everyone was invited. And so we are reminded, we are not alone. We are part of growing, changing circles of relationships, part of a community.

As Dorothy Day said, "We have all known the long loneliness, and we have learned that the only solution is love and that love is found with community."

The Proclamation of the Kingdom

Preach the Gospel at all times, if necessary, use words, a statement attributed to St. Francis of Assisi. Our vocation as Christians is to preach the good news of God's love using every means available to us, using our whole life.

It matters how we live and how we treat others. It matters the choices we make. Are we trying to live lives of integrity and humble service, putting the needs of others before our own, following the example of Jesus? If so, then we are preaching the gospel and proclaiming God's kingdom. It doesn't matter what we do for a living, all of us are called to witness whether with words or without. The most powerful witness is our life—it speaks volumes without uttering a word.

I am heartened by this mystery for it reminds me I, too, have a mission to preach God's word. Sometimes the most powerful sermons we hear occur outside of a church setting. Sometimes the most powerful sermons are the ones we preach with our life. So preach the gospel by every means possible, if necessary, use words.

The Transfiguration

Listen to Jesus. The transfiguration of Jesus occurs in all three of the synoptic gospels, Matthew, Mark and Luke, and it appears every year as part of the Sunday readings. As with the Baptism of the Lord, I used to think, how many times can I preach on the Transfiguration? How can I make it new, year after year? How do I distinguish it from the Baptism account?

In both accounts God speaks. In both accounts God says, “This is my beloved Son.” However in one God says, “In whom I am well pleased,” and in the other God says, “Listen to him,” a significant difference. Listen to him, a message worth repeating over and over. It is a message so simple and yet so significant. We don’t always know what way to turn, how to act or what to do. Often we go rushing off on our own, thinking we know better rather than stopping and taking time for prayer and listening to Jesus.

When in doubt, be still and listen, this mystery tells us. Take time to pray and ask for guidance. We need a reminder to do this. This mystery provides that reminder.

The Institution of the Eucharist

Take time to share a meal. The road of life is long. We need food for the journey. We need to be given that which truly sustains and nourishes us: healthy, wholesome food as well as spiritual food. When Elijah was in despair and ready to give up, God made sure he had food lest the journey prove too much for him. When the Israelites hungered in the desert, God provided bread and meat to sustain them. When the people were hungry, Jesus fed them.

There is a reason why we have to eat every day. It’s a constant reminder of our need for God. We can’t stuff ourselves on one day and go for a week on the food from that day. Some might say it’s inefficient, but God isn’t concerned with being efficient. God is concerned about love and relationships, which are messy and inefficient, yet essential.

And when we are fed, we are to share what we have with others in need. One of the greatest pleasures in life is good food shared with others. Dorothy Day once said, “We cannot love God unless we love each other, and to love we must know each other. We know Him in the breaking of bread, and we know each other in the breaking of bread, and we are not alone anymore. Heaven is a banquet and life is a banquet, too, even with a crust, where there is companionship.” Love transforms even a crust of bread into a banquet.

We need to nourish ourselves through the sharing of a meal, and the sharing of the Eucharist in our larger communities. After all, aren’t both but an appetizer of the heavenly banquet to come—where we will all be in communion with God and each other.

And so, I have added to my prayer repertoire these mysteries of light that remind me: know who you are and whose you are; don’t go it alone; preach the gospel, if necessary use words; listen to Jesus and take time to share a meal. Five life lessons. The mysteries of light can help make even Ordinary Time, the time of everyday life, quite extraordinary.