

We See the Light!
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12:17

“We See the Light!” Pilgrim Church UCC, January 4, 2015 (John 1:1-18) Second Sunday after Christmas

Our Gospel lesson is the Prologue of the Gospel of John—a passage we hear often during the Christmas Season. It’s some of John’s most poetic work: “What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.”[1]

Today let’s talking about light and dark. John often wrote about Jesus as the light of the world, Jesus as the light enlightening the people, and the light overcoming the darkness. Light is often used as a literary metaphor by various Biblical authors to mean knowledge, prosperity, or a sphere of the Divine. We hear verses like, “The Lord is my light and my salvation” and in the Acts of the Apostles, Saul (who became Paul) was blinded by a bright light on the road to Damascus when he heard Jesus say, “Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?”[2] In fact, Saul is blinded by the light for three days in that story!

There’s even popular songs about seeing the light that immediately call to mind light as both knowledge and a sphere of the Divine, metaphorically speaking. Hank Williams’ classic is “I Saw the Light,” one of the few country songs that I actually love. Williams declares: “I wandered so aimless life filled with sin. I wouldn't let my dear savior in. Then Jesus came like a stranger in the night. Praise the Lord I saw the light. I saw the light. I saw the light. No more darkness, no more night. Now I'm so happy no sorrow in sight. Praise the Lord, I saw the light.”

Praise the Lord, I saw the light! This may not be a common phrase that we use around these parts, yet it’s an uplifting one! One can easily appreciate light and dark as metaphors, but I’m cautious about the implications. By light I don’t really mean white and by dark I don’t really mean black. And I certainly don’t want to imply that light is white is good and that dark is black is bad. The implications for race and how we see one another can be awful when we go down that path as people certainly have in our world. This symbolism also has difficult implications for people who are blind and live their lives “in the dark.” As if being in the dark is not just about physical blindness, but also implies being unenlightened. Light and dark are good metaphors, though we need to exercise some caution and watch out for being only dualistic in our thinking.

When considering light and dark, what may be more appropriate is the natural world—the sun, moon, and stars as lights in the sky or the night as darkness. Or even Christmas lights of various colors which obviously don’t show up well during the day. You need the night to see the beautiful lights. Singing “Silent Night” during a worship service doesn’t have the same effect if sunlight is streaming into the sanctuary. That’s the interesting thing about light, you often need dark to be able to fully see it. The light can best be observed when it’s shining in the darkness. Who doesn’t appreciate sunshine peeking through the clouds on especially dark, stormy days? Perhaps light and dark aren’t always diametrically opposed to each other, maybe they have a both/and relationship.

So, praise the Lord, I saw the light! Jesus as the light of the world can also symbolically mean enlightenment. As in, the teachings of Jesus show us a more enlightened way to live and be with each other. The world does have a real shadowy side and Christ’s light can help us

illuminate paths forward and cast light on those places where we need to shine Christ' light. If we close off our hearts to teachings that are intended to build us up, then we can find ourselves lost and fearful in shadowy places of uncertainty. For Christians, we of course turn to Jesus' teachings to show us the way home. To light the path that can get us to God. The Lord is my light and my salvation.

C.S. Lewis, the British theologian and author of the children's series *The Chronicles of Narnia*, once wrote about an interesting interplay between light as enlightenment and dark as fearful uncertainty. At the end of the world in the final book of the series, the children are traveling alongside all the creatures of Narnia to move further in and further up into paradise with Aslan, the lion. This image in *The Last Battle* is Lewis' image of the New Jerusalem at the end of the book of Revelation. But there are some creatures who refuse to leave the shadows and stumble around blindly in the darkness. Lucy becomes despondent, telling these poor souls, "Can't you see? Look up! Look round! Can't you see the sky and the trees and the flowers?"[3]

It ends up that those fearful, lost creatures don't stroll in the new land or enjoy themselves, they stay huddled in a circle looking only at each other, blinded to the beauty all around them. When Lucy appeals to Aslan for help, his response is: "They will not let us help them. They have chosen cunning instead of belief. Their prison is only in their own minds, yet they are in prison; and so afraid of being taken in that they cannot be taken out."[4] It's a profound idea—staying in the shadows as a choice, the prison of our own minds because we may be afraid of the unknown or afraid to move into the light of knowledge and understanding and love.

To see the light and believe in the light is one thing. To make a decision to move forward into the light is another. Sometimes you have to wonder if maybe the people Jesus ministered to didn't always accept him because their eyes couldn't adjust to his light. It's hard for your eyes to adjust when you've been living in darkness for so long. We often have to choose to be taken in by the embrace of our loving God. The gift is freely given and the grace is already there, but are we ready to unwrap it? Would we rather live our lives in the light or in the dark? Maybe we acknowledge that there's a lot of darkness, but we have free access to light that shows us the way home. People don't make that choice for us though—it's a choice that we make for ourselves.

When Barbara Brown Taylor was writing her book *Learning to Walk in the Dark*, she went to a facility in Atlanta that helps people to experience what life is like for the blind. It's called "Dialogue in the Dark" and was the idea of a German man, Andreas Heinecke, who was inspired by philosopher Martin Buber. Buber once said that "The only way to learn is through encounter." [5] In this encounter, people who are sighted are led in the dark by those who are legally blind. The room is completely dark and you are only given a white cane to make your way through real life situations that blind people have to navigate all the time. Your guide gives you instructions as you do your best to follow her voice.

The most difficult experience was crossing the street. The participants all huddled together for safety, not really knowing if they were safe on the sidewalk or out in the middle of the street in the simulation. Taylor got so afraid being in the street simulation that she didn't walk when her guide called out to her group to cross the street. Instead, she stood frozen on the sidewalk and then stepped out into the street all alone. Here's what she says about her encounter: "I stepped into the street. A horn blared. I waved my cane wildly in the air. When it made no contact, I remembered that the cars were not real, but that did not stop me from shaking like a cat in a thunderstorm. When I stumbled over the curb, I bumped into another member of the group, who was as surprised by me as I was by her. 'I don't know where they went,' she said, 'so I thought I'd just stand here until someone came back for me.'" [6]

Sometimes we just decide to move forward, even in the darkness. Though we're a whole lot more successful when we do so side by side. The world we live in is full of shadows, we can't deny and ignore it. Yet, light and companionship makes a difference in darkness. This is a truth that we can hold onto when the shadows deepen—light and companionship help. To live in the light of Jesus Christ means knowledge and peace and sometimes stirring up controversy because we call out things that other people may want kept in the dark. This is why we need the support of those with us on our faith journeys, so that we can stand together as people of the light. And the light shines in the darkness and the darkness will never overcome it. Praise the Lord, we see the light! Amen.

[1] John 1:3-5.

[2] Psalm 27:1 and Acts 9:4.

[3] C.S. Lewis, *The Last Battle*, 181.

[4] C.S. Lewis, *The Last Battle*, 185-186.

[5] Martin Buber, as quoted by Barbra Brown Taylor, *Learning to Walk in the Dark*, 96.

[6] Barbra Brown Taylor, *Learning to Walk in the Dark*, 100.