

Dec. 23, 2018
John 1:1-18
First Parish UCC Brunswick, ME
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The Light Shines

INTRO to SCRIPTURE

In the beginning.... So starts the bible; and so starts the gospel of John. With this echo, John declares Jesus as a new creation that resonates with the first creation.

Last week we focused on the interweaving of physical and spiritual realities that we see in creation itself and in Jesus of Nazareth. This week we will explore the interplay between light and darkness that is prominent in both readings.

SERMON

My husband, Ron, had a grandfather who they called Boo. He liked to play peek a boo with his oldest grandchild. Every time she saw him, she would say Boo. It stuck. Peek a boo is fun because of the way little children delight in seeing and being seen.

We have five senses, but the dominant sense, for those of us who can see, is sight. Thirty to forty percent of our cerebral cortex is dedicated to processing information that comes in through our eyes – way more than any other sense.

Therefore, it's not surprising that day one in the creation story begins:

Then God said, "Let there be light"; and there was light. And God saw that the light was good; and God separated the light from the darkness. God called the light Day, and the darkness ... Night. And there was evening and there was morning, the first day.

John lifts up this theme, in his opening chapter, with these words:

*...the life was the light of all people...
The light shines in the darkness
and the darkness did not overcome it...
The true light, which enlightens
everyone, was coming into the world.*

For John, the cosmic light is fully embodied in Jesus of Nazareth. Later in his gospel, John calls Jesus the light of the world – one who radiates God's presence on earth.

When this sanctuary was built in 1846 the stated intention was for there to never be any artificial lighting. The windows were originally clear to let the light of creation shine in as we opened ourselves to the Christ light. However, it turned out that it was harder to see than they had hoped, so artificial lights- gas lamps - were added. Later the congregation gradually added the stained-glass windows.

Last week I mentioned the international students I met with a couple of weeks ago. They are part of a World Religions class and wanting to learn more about various religions. One of the students asked me who were the four people in the stained-glass windows in the balconies. They are saints of the church - Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, the writers of the gospels.

Maybe you know the story about a little girl's understanding of saints and stained-glass windows. The minister asked the children, "Who is a saint?" The little girl –

looking up at the stained glass windows - responded, "They are the ones the light shines through."

John's Christmas story proclaims that Jesus is the one through whom the light of God shines most brightly and clearly.

The ritual of light is practiced in all world religions. Each week before worship we light these two candles. During Advent we light additional candles as a form of spiritual preparation. It's striking - the power of the light from a single candle to focus our attention and turn us inward, toward the inner light.

In the 21st century, we live in a world of constantly accessible light – lights, lights and more lights. Sometimes, it's hard for us to grasp the symbolic significance of light in a pre-electricity world. It's been less than a hundred years that most people in this country have had electricity.

The Milky Way used to shine brightly at night in most places. These days scientists speak of light pollution which makes it difficult, if not impossible, to see the stars in the night sky in many places. If you look at a satellite image of North America at night so much of the east coast is lit up. How different from the world of the writers of Genesis and John who lived deeply with the rhythms of darkness and light embedded in the setting and the rising of the sun.

I grew up watching the night sky from my bed each night. My second-floor bedroom looked out over a large field so I didn't need any curtains. It was a gift I took for granted, at the time, – always being able to watch the night sky – the interplay of light and dark.

Today our bedroom looks out on the street, so we have curtains. Yet, each night when I turn the inside lights out, I push back the curtain so when I wake up in the night, I can see the lights in the sky – sometime stars or moonlight, like last night.

I was reminded of these experiences at Theater Project the other night as Al Miller embodied Dylan Thomas' *A Child's Christmas in Wales*. This evocative story holds so many captivating Christmas images of playful snow fights, sledding, bells ringing, snoring uncles, and aunts sipping elderberry wine.

Yet the words that always catch my heart are at the end, where the child narrator looks out his bedroom window.

Looking through my bedroom window, out into the moonlight and the unending smoke-colored snow, I could see the lights in the windows of all the other houses on our hill and hear the music rising from them up the long, steady falling night. I turned the gas down, I got into bed. I said some words to the close and holy darkness, and then I slept.

The close and holy darkness...

We are drawn to the light of a candle, but then we close our eyes to shut out the stimuli of external light in order to focus on the inner light of God's presence.

It wasn't until I lived in the Sonoran Desert in the Southwest that I realized that the coming of darkness – the setting of the sun after a blazing hot summer day - could be as comforting as the rising of the sun on a frigid cold winter's day in the northeast. God is with us in darkness and in light.

We all have times of knowing terrifying darkness. Indeed, we need the light of Christ to hold us and lead us in the face of illness, broken relationships, addictions, political turmoil, environmental abuse, and violence. Let your light shine, O God, illuminating our delusions, our prejudices, and our indecisiveness and lead us into your way.

At the same time, we also know the darkness that is mysterious, yet inviting – the close and holy darkness. A darkness that interplays with light, inviting us toward wisdom, pilgrimage, and freedom.

The other morning, I was up very early. It was still very dark. It was a silent and holy night and there was a bright, bright light in the eastern sky. It was the planet Venus. Watching it, I found myself thinking about

- the magi seeking wisdom
- sailors who for centuries depended on the stars to find their way
- runaway slaves seeking freedom.

Our Christmas stories depict this interplay of light and dark...

- Magi following a star in the night sky.
- Shepherds, keeping watch over their flock by night, being visited by angels whose glory shown round about them.
- And the Word of creation through whom the light of God shines to enlighten everyone.