

SURPRISED BY LIGHT

Isaiah 60: 1-6 & Matthew 2: 1-11

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The great mythologist, Joseph Campbell, was once on a tour to publicize one of his books and he was supposed to go on a morning radio talk show with one of those obnoxious, know-it-all, radio personalities who employed an unending torrent hyperbole and bombast to intimidate his guests and make himself look superior.

Campbell said that the guy warned him before the interview started that he was a hard hitting interviewer who liked to “go after” people. Campbell tried to look impressed but, a few minutes later, when the interview began, it became clear that the “hard hitting” interviewer had never read Campbell’s book.

So, the guy began, what’s a myth?

Campbell gave his standard reply that myths are the stories we tell that give meaning to our lives and demonstrate our common values and experiences as a people.

So, said the interviewer, a myth is a lie.

No, said Campbell, it’s a metaphor.

Which is a lies.

No, it’s a metaphor.

The interview went on like that for nearly an hour. The host insisting that myths were lies and Campbell insisting that they are metaphors. Finally, with the clock ticking down to the last minute or so, it became clear to Joseph Campbell that the host not only did not understand what a myth was, he didn’t understand what a metaphor was, either.

So Campbell asked him: “Okay, you tell me. What’s a metaphor? Give me an example of one.”

The host bumbled and harrumphed but Campbell wouldn’t let him off the hook. “Give me an example of what you think a metaphor is.”

Finally the interviewer said, “Well, my friend, John can run very fast. He runs like a deer.”

“That’s a simile,” said Campbell. “A comparison that uses the word like or as. A metaphor leaves out the like or as. Instead of saying, ‘My friend, John, runs like a deer,’ a metaphor would say, ‘My friend, John, is a deer.’”

The radio host blinked. “But that’s a lie.”

No, it’s a metaphor.

No, it’s a lie.

It’s a metaphor.

And, on that, the time ran out and the show ended.

LIGHT AND DARK

Wonderful Counselor. Almighty God. The Everlasting Father. The Prince of Peace. The Good Shepherd. The Word of God Made Flesh. The True Vine. The Bread of Life. The Gate for the Sheep.

These are just a few of the metaphors that are used to describe Jesus in the Bible. Some of them he used to describe himself and his ministry in the Gospel of John with the seven “I am” phrases.¹

This morning, however, and every year on this first Sunday of January, we focus on one particular metaphor for Jesus, the one that opens the Gospel of John and the one that is used in Isaiah to describe the coming messiah: The Light of the World.

The days are beginning to grow longer now. The light is returning and, as it does, we are reminded that light, to the primitive minds of the first biblical writers was an entirely different thing than it is to us.

Two thousand years ago when this metaphor was first spoken, light was rare and expensive. It came naturally and abundantly from the sun but, once the sun went down at night, there were no lights to turn on that would keep the darkness at bay.

We live with almost constant light. Light is always at our finger tips. We take it for granted.

Even when the power is out and I’m using a flashlight to get around the house, I still flip the light switch when I go through a door into a room. It’s instinctive. Light is pervasive and ubiquitous in our culture.

Every year the earth is showered with meteors – in June they are the Lyrids and the Bootids, in July the Perseids, in November the Leonids. Now most people would consider Wilmington a rural area but the fact is, if you want to see these beautiful meteor showers you have to leave Wilmington because there’s too much light here. Street lights, parking lot lights, neon signs, and airport lights make it impossible to see most of the night sky, even in a rural place like Wilmington. If you want to see the meteor showers you have to go into the real rural areas where they don’t have streetlights.

The fact is, unless you’ve been on a tour of Mammoth Cave, you’ve probably never experienced absolute darkness before. In the cave they will usually turn the lights off for just a few moments so you can feel what it’s like because it’s such a rare thing for us.

¹ Bread of Life (6:35); Light of the World (8:12); The Gate (10:9); The Good Shepherd (10:11); The Resurrection and the Life (11:25-26); The Way, the Truth and the Life (14:6); The True Vine (15:5).

For the Palestinian people of the first century, it was common. Once the sun went down and the candles were blown out, unless there was a bright moon, the people routinely experienced nearly absolute darkness with the stars the only light.

Darkness was near absolute in those days and it was dangerous. In fact, it was so dangerous that Hebrew law required every homeowner to build a parapet or a low wall or railing around the roof of their house. Houses had flat roofs, you will remember, and people often slept on their roofs in the summer. The law required that you put a safety wall around the roof to keep people from walking off of it in the dark of night.

Darkness provided concealment for enemies, thieves, robbers, and highwaymen. It was a soldier's greatest enemy and a sailor's greatest fear. Boats never ventured beyond eyesight of the watch fire that was kept on land in those days because you could get lost on the water at night.

Darkness was a thing to be feared and avoided.

And light was what saved you from the dangers of darkness. But light never came just by itself. Light was always linked to other things so it became a very important symbol in the early church.

LIGHT AS SAVIOR/PROTECTOR

Because darkness was so dangerous, light was seen as a savior and protector. Light shows you where the dangers are, where the pitfalls are, where the snakes and scorpions are. Light reveals and informs. Even today we use the word elucidate which means to make something clear or understandable by shining a light upon it.

When we ask someone to explain something we might use the metaphor of shining a light... "perhaps you can shine a little light on this topic.." etc.

So Jesus is called the light of the world.

It is by way of Jesus that the world is made understandable and we are able to see the pitfalls that separate us from God, our neighbors, and our essential, authentic selves.

When we walk into a dark room we turn on a light. The light doesn't change the room but it changes the way we see the room. We see where the toys are on the floor that might cause us pain if we step on them. It shows us where the coffee table is that we surely would have stubbed our toe against had we tried to walk across that room in the dark. It shows us where grandma's vase is that we probably would have bumped into and broken.

It makes it safe to walk across the room. It makes the room negotiable for us.

Jesus is the light that makes life negotiable. He is the light that shows us all the things that can hurt us by removing us further from God. He is the light that shows us those obstacles that might have hurt us had we not seen them but now are simply problems to be solved and overcome. Jesus is the light that makes life traversable.

LIGHT AS REVEALER

The metaphor is not exhausted there, however.

Just as a light can show us the safe way to traverse a room and avoid the obstacle, it also shows us the real state of the room. It shows us the toys that didn't get put away, the threadbare state of the carpet, the dust on the mantel and the cobwebs in the corners.

One of the first jobs I ever had that wasn't mowing grass or weeding gardens, was working as a busboy in a restaurant at a fancy hotel near the Indianapolis airport. My job was to serve ice water and bread to the guests and keep them supplied throughout the meal. Also I had to dust the crumbs off the table and smooth the tablecloth between the courses of the meal.

Much to my shock and dismay, I was taught not to cup my hand at the edge of the table to catch the crumbs so I could throw them away but to – and I know this will be a shock to all of you as it was to me – to simply brush the crumbs from the table onto the floor. The floor!

That, I discovered, is why the lights are kept dim in most white tablecloth restaurants. It has nothing to do with romantic atmosphere or setting a mood! It has to do with hiding the flaws! It's so you don't see all those crumbs on the floor which I was sure my mother would have thrown a fit over had she seen them.

Light shows us what the room really looks like – crumbs, cracks, dust, cobwebs, flaws and all.

And the "Light of the World" show us what the world really looks like.

Once Jesus enters our lives our illusions and fantasies flee. They can't stand up to the light. God calls us in Jesus Christ, to live in and love the world AS IT IS, not as we wish it was or as we would like for it to be.

Once Jesus shines his light of grace upon our neighbors we don't have to wait for them to become perfect or pretend that they are before we love them. We can love them just as they are, "warts and all."

Once Jesus shines his light upon the institutions of this world, we don't have to wait for them to become perfect or kid ourselves into thinking that they are. We can realize that every human institution is flawed and in need of perfecting and that perfecting process begins, when it begins, with God.

Once Jesus shines his light on us, we don't have to lie to ourselves any more about our imperfect motivations or our twisted perceptions. We can admit to ourselves and each other that we are weak, fragile, flawed creatures who often need help and always need understanding. And we can stand in front of the mirror and look honestly at the person looking back and shrug, and smile, and thank God for the gift of life, in spite of what we may have done with it.

LIGHT AS HEAT

First century Christians also realized that, for them, light was always inseparably linked to heat. That was both the blessing and the price of light.

In the winter months, the same light that illuminated their living areas also provided some of the heat that made those living areas livable. That reality is often lost on us but I have heard it said that every automobile emergency kit should include a candle. Should you get stranded in the winter, the candle can provide light when days are short and nights long, and the heat from a single candle can raise the temperature in most cars sufficiently to keep you from freezing to death and keep your fingers and ears from getting frost bitten.

As we said, the heat which comes with light can be a blessing.

But it is also, when the room is already warm, a price that has to be paid.

Have you ever had to light your home with kerosene lanterns and candles after a thunderstorm in July? It's nearly unbearable, isn't it? I sometimes wonder if I would be able to stand here and preach so close to all these candles if we celebrated Epiphany in June instead of January. This table is putting out a lot of BTU's, let me tell you.

And, of course, the early church knew that the fire, which was the principle source of their heat and light, was also extremely dangerous. It provided the heat which made water potable and sterilized eating utensils but it also provided the heat which could burn down your house or cause you intense suffering and pain if it came too close to your skin.

As we apply the metaphor of light to Jesus, we realize that his light comes with its own kind of heat, as well.

We cannot come too close to him without feeling at least somewhat convicted. We like to stand at something of a remove from him because we know that we have not taken him as seriously as we promised we would.

We have heard him say "love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you." And we have bought guns instead.

We have heard him say "sell all you have and give it to the poor." And we have amassed fortunes for ourselves instead.

We have heard him say "go into the world and make disciples of all people." And we have hunkered down in our comfortable pews and concentrated on our own needs instead.

We cannot enjoy his light without suffering his heat, just a little.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer said God's grace is absolute, but it is not cheap.

Martin Luther said, God is love, but he is a white hot furnace of love.

The light of life that is Jesus comes with heat as well – heat that is both blessing and price.

LIGHT AS LIFE

Finally, we will not have fully explored the metaphor of light until we look to our gardens.

I have one of those yards that is almost all in the shade all of the time. My back yard is especially thus.

Do you know how hard it is to grow something, anything in a yard that is in constant shade? Oh, yeah, I know they have these so called "shade loving" grasses that they say will grow but the fact is, once it comes up, it is so insubstantial and fragile that even our Jack Russell Terrier kills it simply by traipsing back and forth across it. And that's provided I can get it to come up at all.

Those great, giant Maple trees all around simply don't allow for it. They don't allow the light to reach the things that are growing in the yard and, folks, light is life.

We used to have three big juniper trees growing in front of the shed to hide it from the street and, because that was one of the few places where sunlight actually entered the yard, they grew nice and straight and tall, for a while. Then the Maples outgrew them and the junipers started growing toward the one small opening in the trees where the sun managed to break through for a few minutes a day until, by this summer, they were growing at nearly a forty-five degree angle and we finally had to cut them down.

That's an extreme example but you've all see that, haven't you? Plants that so crave the light that they will twist themselves into grotesque shapes to achieve it. This, I am told, is one of the secrets that bonsai artists use to twist and shape those miniature trees they grow so beautifully. They simply supply light in a limited way and the tree will grow to meet it.

Even those things that grow in the shade need light. They just need less of it. They can live on and, in some cases even thrive in, limited or filtered light. Put them in absolute darkness, however, and they will perish.

That's why John's gospel starts with the light metaphor and it is this aspect of the metaphor that he emphasizes.

Listen: **In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. 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.**

Light is life and Jesus is light.

If we want life, real life, authentic life, eternal life we have to turn, as the juniper does, to the light. If we don't, what we have will not be life at all. It will be something else. Some imitation of life, some inferior substitute for life, but it not real life.

LIKE THE MAGI

In the season of Epiphany we celebrate the light that is Jesus by lighting candles and telling stories.

We tell the story of the wise men who saw a light in the sky and followed it to the light of the world. We tell the story of how the Jesus shined the light of revelation upon himself and his ministry when he turned water into wine at a wedding in Cana of Galilee. And we tell the story of how John the Baptizer was the spark that ignited the true light that was Jesus at his baptism.

As the days get longer and the light of the sun returns to our days, let us pray that the light of Jesus Christ, God's light, the light of the world, that light that is true life, will return to us as well.

AMEN