

This Little Light of Mine
© Rev. Dr. Gary Blaine
University Congregational Church
October 18, 2009

Reading: Genesis 1: 1-5, 14-19 (NRSV)

In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters. 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 he called Night. And there was evening and there was morning, the first day.

And God said, “Let there be lights in the dome of the sky to separate the day from the night; and let them be for signs and for seasons and for days and years, and let them be lights in the dome of the sky to give light upon the earth.” And it was so. God made the two great lights – the greater light to rule the day and the lesser light to rule the night – and the stars. God set them in the dome of the sky to give light upon the earth, to rule over the day and over the night, and to separate the light from the darkness. And God saw that it was good. And there was evening and there was morning, the fourth day.

The story is told of a cave. Like all caves this cave lived underground and spent its entire life in darkness. One day it heard a voice calling to it, “Come up into the light; come and see the sunshine.”

The cave retorted, “I don’t know what you mean; there isn’t anything but darkness.” But after some coaxing the

cave ventured forth and was surprised to see light everywhere. Looking up to the sun the cave said, "Now it is your turn. Come with me and see the darkness."

The sun asked, "What is the darkness?" The cave replied, "Come and see."

The sun accepted the invitation. As it entered the cave it said, "Now show me your darkness." But there was no darkness.

There are many times when the world and the people in it are very much like that cave. Its existence is subterranean and murky. Down the cold shaft of darkness broods the stale breath of death. The malign vapors of night twist down corridors of racial prejudice, sexism, tribalism, and blind nationalism. The world is often an inky labyrinth of greed, deceit, personal and social corruption. In dusky corners creep the demons of despair and depression, gnawing on the bones of dreams and the rinds of relationships.

Given these realities, human beings throughout the history of religion have sought that light which could dispel

the darkness. Therefore, light is the first creation in many cosmologies of ancient religions, including those of Babylonia, Egypt, Greece, India, and Phoenicia. God is light as in the sun god Re of Egypt. God is also light in the religion of the Parsis in India and in other Zoroastrian communities. God and the sun are one and the same in these religions.

This is easy enough to understand. The simplest ancient man or woman could explain it. The sun brought forth the harvest after the floods of the Nile receded. It was when the sun came back from the darkness of winter that the seeds sprouted and the flocks and herds brought forth their young on the fertile plains of the Tigris and Euphrates. Only by the light of the sun would one dare enter the forests and jungles to forage and hunt for food. Without the light the paths became indistinguishable and confused, leaving one lost in blind bewilderment. And finally, all shapes lose their definitions and their beauty in the night. But by the light of the sun plants, animals, rivers, mountains, and people return their focus and shape. In the light of the sun

blue returns to the sky; green hues embellish the trees and meadows; and red, yellow, and purple announce flower blossoms. Indeed, for the ancient human beings such was the power of the sun, the very presence of God.

In the cosmology of the ancient Hebrews light was the first order of creation. Genesis declared, “God said, ‘Let there be light,’ and there was light.” What most people do not grasp is that this light is not the light of sun or moon. This light is created before the rays of sky and stars or the brilliance of Thomas Edison. This is a different kind of light. It is light of a transcendent order. Now Genesis does not say that this Light is God, as the Egyptians believed. It has, rather, the qualities of God’s creatureliness and like all of God’s creatures has a role and function. This Light rushes in to fill the world once flooded by chaos, death, shadow, fear, and darkness. The Light appears with a mission. It is the mission of life.

What the writers of Genesis understood, and most of us have forgotten, is that there burns a light of creation a priori to the light of the sun. The ordering and creation of

life requires more than photons and the physics of matter. We know, for example, that there is more to the conception of a human being than the fertilization of the egg by a spermatozoon. Prior to that union there was passion, of hope, or fear, or power and virility. There were issues of giving and receiving or taking; and always the question of the future. These are matters of the heart as much as they are of the body. They are relevant in every organization of life. They must have their ordering. For who can have any kind of a relationship when their feelings are a reign of chaos? Who can assume a position of responsibility when his or her mind is flooded with every passing fad or fashion?

I affirm this morning the Light of creation. It burns, not “out there” in the heavens; it shines within. It glows in every human breast, however dimly in some cases. It glows in your deepest being. Emerson declared, “the currents of Universal Being flow through me.” He often complained that the church, more often than not, neglected the fountain of life, which was God in the human soul. In *The Harvard Divinity School Address* Emerson declared, “True teaching

comes not from those who can recite the creeds, stories, and doctrines but those whose soul is courage, piety, love, and wisdom.” This is the light that cuts through the darkness of chaos. It is the beacon of the soul that penetrates the fog of our existence, finding those paths that will lead us to a life of purpose and wholeness. This is the light of compassion, truth, and integrity. It is the kindling of our conscience that marks the nobility of being human.

I think this sacred element is like a three-way light bulb. As you know, a three-way light bulb has an escalating power of brilliance. There are three filaments, say a 50-watt filament, a 100-watt filament, and a 150-watt filament. At each turn of the switch respective filaments are powered.

Now we would like to think that our soul has equal luminosity of compassion, truth, and integrity. Surely we are equally brilliant in terms of personal wisdom, veracity, and love. I should like to think that about my self. But like the three-way light bulb my love, truth, and moral agency have different strengths of filament.

Now someone might be thinking, what is all this nonsense about the inner light, or the light of the soul, or the light of God? We have our minds and the intellectual capacity to reasonably determine a moral course of action. We have empathy for human beings and we are charitable folks. We have a solid education, our credentials reputable, and we are respected in our field. I am happy that we have these skill sets. We need them. The world needs them. But knowing the law is not the same thing as doing justice. The capacity to discern moral issues is not the same thing that propels a person to make the right choice. Education is only one branch of wisdom and the person who does not understand the difference is a fool. Contributions to the United Way are not the same thing as the profound and soulful love of those who are dispossessed, alienated, broken, and poor.

What is it finally that moves us beyond logic and science to deeply care for one another; do the right thing by others; and allow our lives and our futures to be shaped by a truth that a career counselor could never design. What is

the inner motivation that beckons us to nurture the miracle of life? The Quakers believe that this is the Divine presence within every person, or the “inner light.” Nineteenth century minister William Ellery Channing called it the “seed” of God that lies within every breast. The Friends believe that because every person is gifted with the elements of God he or she is a person of inherent worth and dignity.

Now many people consider such a proposition as illogical and irrelevant. The depth of such conscience often offends the mores and values of society. People who display such qualities are considered “religious fanatics.” There are those who considered the Mahatma Gandhi somewhat daft because he listened to what he called the “inner voices.” My perception is that the people who follow the light are the people who make real differences in history, art, and literature.

Consider John Woolman, one of the few people who took an active stand against slavery in the 1700’s. When Woolman was 23 years old he was a clerk in a dry goods store in Mount Holly, New Jersey. Both he and his employer

were Quakers. The owner instructed Woolman to write a bill of sale for a black slave named Nancy.

There were many Quakers who owned slaves in 1743 but Woolman had never been an agent in the sale of one. To his own amazement John Woolman said to his employer and the buyer, "I believe slave-keeping to be a practice inconsistent with the Christian religion." Now listen to their response. They told Woolman that this was a "light" that had not reached them yet. Woolman completed writing the bill of sale and Nancy was removed from the property that very evening.

Woolman reported in his journal that he was deeply troubled by his involvement in the proposition. He felt guilty that he had not refused to write the bill "as a thing against my conscience." Several months later another Quaker asked him to draw up a bill of sale for another slave. This time Woolman excused himself. The seller responded that keeping a slave had troubled his conscience too. They parted in "good will" Woolman reported in his journal.

He would spend the rest of his life trying to raise the

conscience of the nation. He wrote a pamphlet entitled “Some Considerations on the Keeping of Negroes.” It was a Philadelphia printer named Benjamin Franklin who published it in 1754. Woolman traveled about the colonies preaching against the slave trade. He worked to convince the Rhode Island and New Jersey legislatures to abolish the slave trade. On visiting the center for slave trade in Newport, Rhode Island he saw first hand human beings in pens and chains. He wrote in his journal, “My belly trembled, my lips quivered, I shivered in myself.”

When Woolman realized that sugar and dyes, such as indigo, were produced by slave owners he stopped using sugar and wearing clothes that were dyed. This meant that he wore white clothes all year round. Many of his neighbors found his new habits disturbing. On a visit to England in 1772 to preach against slavery Woolman attended an annual meeting of Quaker Ministers and Elders. An observer described Woolman’s appearance: “His dress was as follows. A white hat, a coarse raw linen shirt, his coat, waistcoat and breeches of white coarse woolen cloth, with

yarn stockings.”

Though the English Quakers initially resisted his ideas, his “light” soon persuaded them. For several weeks Woolman preached throughout England. He soon complained of dizziness and weakness and was diagnosed with smallpox. He died after a week of illness.

Fourteen years later, in 1786 the legislature of Rhode Island prohibited the importation of black slaves. Soon thereafter none other than Benjamin Franklin accepted the presidency of Pennsylvania’s abolition society. Franklin wrote the first petition to the Congress of the United States to abolish slavery.

Woolman’s journal and other writings on slavery were reprinted 40 times in England in the battle against the slave trade. Finally in 1807, Parliament outlawed the slave trade and in 1833 abolished slavery in all British possessions. Woolman’s light would inspire William Wilberforce, William Lloyd Garrison, and John Quincy Adams to remove the

scourge of slavery from England and the United States.¹

Every once in a while a light pushes up through the many layers of our conscience, urging us to a larger vision of truth and goodness. It inspires us to think beyond the way things are and imagine what might be in the world of women and men and nature. It has many names so don't get hung up on titles. Just let the light shine. You will change the world.

Finis

¹ Adapted from "John Woolman's Stand," *Guideposts* at <http://www.guideposts.com/print/11603>.