

"The Way of Jesus: The Quest for Light"
A Sermon for University Congregational Church
Sunday, August 8, 2021
Rev. Paul Ellis Jackson

Traditional Word:

"You are the light of the world. A town built on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven.--
Matthew 5:14-16

Contemporary Word

"On the subjects of which we know nothing,...we both believe, and disbelieve a hundred times an Hour, which keeps Believing nimble." --Emily Dickinson

A few years ago, a CNN journalist asked a group of children some questions. Their responses to questions including "Who is God?" "What does God wear?" and "What is God's job?" range from the hilarious to the touching and deeply poignant. "God doesn't have a house. He doesn't need one except on Sundays 'cause that's the day he likes to rest," said one child named Ethan, age 8. A young girl named Kayla, who is 8½, said, "I wish God could make me famous SOON!" A boy of 7 named Jackson said, "I call God when I need help with things but not my homework, because my mom says I have to do that by myself,"

A little boy named Max, 8, said, "My father never believed you were real, but my mom did, but then she got sick, and now he prays to you, but my mom doesn't anymore." Manny, who's 6, wrote, "My mom talks to God when we need more

money." The article closes with the words of Uma, age 11, who said, "God lives wherever you imagine. ... To believe in God, you need to imagine. God does anything you can imagine." Children seem to know exactly who God is and where God lives.

The Ancients knew exactly where God was located as well. In the ancient world, the cosmology of the universe, the order of the universe, had been well-established by the Greek thinkers. We mortals lived here on earth—sort of a middle plane between the other two. The gods (or God, for the Israelites and other monotheists) live high above us in the firmament, a great cloud of vapor or what they called ether that occasionally overflowed with water, and we experience that as rain. Below our feet was the dreaded underworld, ruled over by Hades or Poseidon or Satan or the Devil or whatever other name you wanted to give to the ruler of that realm. This was the classical three-tiered cosmology of antiquity, and it served the people well. God was in God's heaven, and all was right with the world—in this best of all possible worlds, as Dr. Pangloss might remind us.

As the Enlightenment and the Reformation smashed our preconceived notions about this elegant cosmology that had been established for millennia, something very unsettling happened. Modernity and these new ways of thinking brought the very real possibility, the terrifying possibility, that God, as we understood God to be up to this point, was not reliably present—and quite possibly even absent. Diane Butler Bass asks: "Was God really in heaven, as generations of Christians had recited

in their prayers? Although moderns Christians struggled with many questions, an overarching one was achingly simple: "Where is God?" (221)

We have hints as to where people have believed God to reside for centuries, and one of the most beautiful ways to represent this was through the use of light. Halos were given to medieval representations of the Holy One or the Saints. A sort of diffuse light often permeated where the artist wanted a more elusive, more ambiguous God. From the time of the early Jewish writings found in the Hebrew Bible onward, the Divine One was often seen and described as light—in one form or another—a burning bush, anyone? To the people of the Modern age (which historians have placed as roughly the years between 1500 and the early 1900s), light was seen as an actual property that mimicked the properties of the Holy One. Light could be scientifically studied, thus giving us rational data to assure the humans living in the Modern era that God was indeed alive and well. Science could prove it!

An English theologian named Jonathan Edwards handled the theme of light in perhaps the best examples of the period. He delivered a sermon in 1734 called "A Divine and Supernatural Light," in which he explored God's actual, physical location. Where is God? Where does God reside? To Edwards, "God constantly emanated love as a kind of 'divine light' shed over the universe." (222). However, also according to Edwards, no human could see this light until they had encountered the Holy Spirit, who then gave new believers "a new spiritual sense" in which they could detect this light of God's. Thus the "spiritually enlightened" person does not "merely rationally believe that God is glorious, but [they have] a sense of the gloriousness of

God in [their] heart." (222) So, for the early Modern period, Christians seeing the light meant actually seeing God's presence.

We have experienced some of the most significant upheavals in the Christian faith in the past seventy-five years. For many decades we have been struggling with this question: "Where is God." Western Christianity has been in seeking mode for a long time now. There have been significant changes in how people view their spiritual practices—we've made room for different interpretations of Christianity, we've made room for a different way to worship the Holy One and different ways to practice our religion. Many of those ways use light as a metaphor for the Holy One. One of the most peaceful communities of modern-day Christ-Followers has light as their primary metaphor for God.

George Fox was a humble 17th-century cobbler. In 1643, when England was in the middle of a civil war, and Fox was surrounded by the social and religious upheaval brought on by that war, he abandoned his family and his livelihood and embarked on a spiritual quest. George Fox wandered from religion to religion, spiritual practice to spiritual practice, seeking God. He found little solace in the two main branches of Protestantism that existed during his day, Anglicanism and Calvinism, and he held them in contempt for the way he felt they distanced themselves from God through elaborate rituals. Eventually, Fox would have a very clear and direct experience that was separate from any corporate worship. Fox explains it as such: "Christ, the great heavenly prophet, the true Light coming into

the world that illumines every person; that they might believe in it and become children of the light, and so have the light of life, and not come into condemnation."

As George Fox continued to refine his spiritual beliefs and practices, he began to gather like-minded friends. This ersatz group would come to be known as the Society of Friends, or more commonly as the Quakers. The Quakers developed a doctrine of the Inner Light that would become the foundation, the heart, of their new community. This is the Quaker doctrine of Inner Light: That there is an evangelical and saving light and grace in all, the universality of the love and mercy of God towards mankind—both in the death of his beloved Son, the Lord Jesus Christ, and in the manifestation of the light in the heart—is established and confirmed against the objections of those who deny it."

Many find God's presence and light in the scriptures. The writer of the Gospel of Matthew wrote: "You are the light of the world. A town built on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven.

I have a favorite memory from my teenage years. One of my best friends and I were hanging out near his house, shooting the breeze, being teenagers, and we got started on the topic of God. Now my friend had been raised in a religious household, but like most of us in our teen years, he had questions—and his big question at the time was why do the Jewish people believe in one God, and the Hindus another, and

yet the way of Islam seems to have another God in Allah? My response, which I had actually been thinking about a lot that autumn, was to remark that I believe that God can be thought of like a giant diamond with many facets, each reflecting God's light to the world, but from different sides of the diamond. And then people see that light reflected in their own faith system, and they believe that what they are seeing and understanding is their God. Pretty decent logic for a 16-year-old, no?

16-year-old Paul had faith in God; he had convictions, but he still had doubts—he still had uncertainty. There's not too much different about 50-something Paul, except that he can more clearly state his convictions and clearly understand his doubts—many of them the same as I had back then. Most of us have these same feelings of uncertainty—when the ground shifts below us after a lifetime of believing we lived on top of solid bedrock. Most of us have doubts about the "light."

This may surprise you, but even Mother Teresa suffered a terrible "crisis of faith." During a Time Magazine expose', the author discovered that contrary to the spirituality that Mother Teresa portrayed in public, in private, her spiritual life was "an arid landscape from which the deity had disappeared." Sound familiar to anyone here today? Listen to these words that Mother Teresa wrote to a friend: "As for me, the silence and emptiness is so great that I look and do not see, listen and do not hear." One of the world's more revered spiritual figures, Mother Teresa, lived a life filled with doubt.

If even our great spiritual guides can suffer from periods of significant doubt, what does that mean for us? Doubt has had a long history in Western society, but

modernity has proven especially amenable to the erosion of religious certainty. Our faith is in doubt because the ground it was built upon is shaky and filled with questionable constructions.

The great American poet, Emily Dickinson, flirted with certainty many times in her life. She lived in a period of time in the United States where there were many flare-ups of evangelism—they're called the Great Awakenings, and a couple happened in her lifetime. Miss Dickinson flirted with conversion to the more evangelical faith, but she was uncomfortable with their certainty. She refused to recite a confession of faith and instead developed a language of doubt with which for her to think about the Holy One. She expressed this with this line: "A loss of something ever felt I--/ he first that I could recollect/ Bereft I was—of what I knew not." It was noted that Dickinson's disenchantment with the faith of her time was a common cultural phenomenon in the twentieth century. Emily was ahead of the rest of us a bit because she had already anticipated that "doubt and faith exist in a paradoxical relationship." Another biographer noted that Dickinson was "the Cheshire Cat' of doubt. Who welcomed ambiguity 'playfully' and depicted an unsettled version of Christianity that 'doubts as fervently as it believes." And while she appears to profess solid Trinitarian thought in her poetry, she also holds her doubt up as a light to her truth. Listen to this Emily Dickinson Poem:

Life—is what we make of it—

Death—we do not know—

Christ's acquaintance with Him

Justify Him—though—

He—would trust no stranger—

Other—could betray—

Just His own endorsement—

That—sufficeth Me—

All the other Distance

He hath traversed first—

No New Mile remaineth—

Far as Paradise—

His sure foot preceding—

Tender Pioneer—

Base must be the Coward

Dare not venture—now—

Emily Dickinson reconciled her faith with a vision of Jesus as a "tender pioneer."—one who goes before us. Emily Dickinson found a way for her to approach the Christ Event through her creativity—her stunning and vital poems. In her reverence to the "tender pioneer," she shows us Jesus' humanity and then shows us a way forward using doubt as a way of spirituality. Doubt as a spiritual practice? That works for me.

Diane Butler Bass ends this chapter on the Quest for Light with these words: "Even to the doubter, Jesus remained a compelling figure worthy of both imitation and love. For a thoroughly modern thinker, like [Emily] Dickinson, doubt served as a necessary aspect of the Christian faith and the Christian God." (246) Emily Dickinson herself had the final say when she wrote: "On the subjects of which we know nothing,...we both believe, and disbelieve a hundred times an Hour, which keeps Believing nimble." Where is God? The doubters answered: Who knows? But that is what makes belief an art.

Early in Gary Cox's tenure here, Gary was our second senior minister, and we lost him to cancer far too early in 2006. Still, early in his tenure, he preached an excellent sermon on "Doubting Thomas," you know the one, about the apostle who refused to believe in the resurrection until he could touch Jesus' wounds? Well, Gary told me after that worship service that he loved the character of Doubting Thomas because he lets us off the hook. If one of Jesus' closest companions, one of his chosen apostle's can doubt, so can we. That's how you make belief an art. You help someone in your congregation better understand his doubt.

How do you make your belief an art? How do you hold your own ambivalence and doubt in abeyance and still, still, still despite everything that has happened in your life, we still manage to cling to faith. God is right there with us in the middle of our doubt. We trust that the Holy One is right here next to us, urging us to bring God's justice to the world. Encouraging us to see in each other our shared humanity, which is really just recognizing that God resides in each of us. Even those people we dislike. Amen

BENEDICTION

You are the light of the world

And in the darkness, you hold tight to your doubt, trusting that the morning light will return. That's faith! May you have enough doubt and enough certainty this week to keep all of your convictions and beliefs nimble! Go, in peace, and be the light.

RESOURCES USED:

Holy Bible, NRSV

<https://www.cnn.com/2015/12/23/health/children-how-they-view-god-parenting/index.html>

Diana Butler Bass. *A People's History of Christianity: The Other Side of the Story*, HarperCollins, New York, NY, 2009.