

1st Sunday of Epiphany Year A
“Bearing Witness to the Light”
Historical Service/ the 130th year of Christ Church Anacortes
Jan 12, 2020

This is the first Sunday of Epiphany, the season of God’s light coming into the world. Light is a metaphor, and I often think of a flashlight, helping to see our path and our destination more clearly.

Yesterday, I was at the Safeway in the checkout line. The person in front of me was berating the checker because her light was not on. ‘How can we know your line is open when you don’t turn on your light?’ I thought – well, it is epiphany, and epiphany is all about the light! The light serves as beacon.

What is that light? God, coming into the world as human to show us about God. And if *our* light is not lit – that is, we are not testifying to the light of Jesus, by our words and actions-- then how are we bearers of the light? How would anyone know about the light or that we are Christians? How will the faith be passed on to the next generation?

The lectern this Sunday has been moved to “the gospel side” as it would have been called in the old church. Today we are worshiping from the 1789 prayer book as revised up to 1871. This service commemorates the 130th year of our congregation, which began worshiping together on Dec. 1, 1890. The Scripture readings (including the Gospel) are in the Prayer Book, itself; the readings for 1st Epiphany were the same every single year.

In our revised common lectionary, the Gospel reading for first Epiphany celebrates the Baptism of Jesus by John, and is read from Matthew, Mark or Luke depending on the lectionary year (A,B,C). In the 1871 book, the Gospel reading for 1st Epiphany, Luke 2, begins after a Passover celebration., when the crowds leave Jerusalem. After a day of travel, Jesus’ parents discover he is missing; following a three day search they find him in the temple. “Did you not know that I must be about my Father’s business?” Jesus says to his parents.

Both Gospel stories are about the start of Jesus’ *public* ministry: the coming of the light to the people, and the beginning of Jesus’ testimony by word and deed to the very nature of God.

The historical practice was to use ‘text’ or ‘topic’ sermons, most commonly from *The Anglican Book of Sermons*. Clergy were neither expected nor encouraged to write their own sermons!

I will loosely use a sermon text by Mr. John Donne. Mr. Donne was a 17th century English poet and cleric in the Church of England. He is renowned as a metaphysical poet and theologian. (*No man is an island unto himself*– originally written as prose, part of a series of meditations) ‘Metaphysical’ is that which relates to the nature of being or essential reality – the first principles, so to speak.

Mr. Donne's sermon is 35 pages, preached at St. Paul's in London. I will be much briefer, though I will try to retain some of his turns of phrase.

Mr. Donne begins by quoting from the prologue of the Gospel of John, verse 1.8: *He was not that light, but was sent to beare witnesse of that light.*" He then sets out the metaphysical questions, 'who and what was the light which John the Baptist is denied to be,' and 'why was testimony necessary?'

To set our context then, a bit more of John's prologue:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the Beginning with God....The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it. There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light. The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world. John 1:1-9

Mr. Donne says,

...why so evident a thing as light, and *such* a light, *that* light, required testimony of man....and *why any* testimony *at all*...?

Just so. Light is evident to all. Why does light require testimony, especially if that light is of God? Jesus is both the light (being God) and the (human) witness to God. John is the designated historical witness to the coming, to Jesus. Light is all encompassing, leaving nothing hidden. Light is evident to all. Isn't it?

From Mr. Donne's text, quoting and expanding the words of two church Fathers – Ambrose and Augustine.

First, then God made *light* first, *ut innotescerent omnia*/Ambrose/ ...that man might glorifie God in seeing the creature, and *him* in it; for, *frustra fecisset*, (says the same Father [Ambrose]) it had been to no purpose to have a world, and no light. But though light discover and manifest everything else to us, and it selfe too, if all be well disposed, yet in the *fifth* verse of this chapter, there is reason enough given, why this light in our text requires testimony; that is, *the light shines in darknesse, and the darknesse comprehends it not*; and therefore, *Propter non intelligentes, proper incredulos, propter infirmos, Sollucernas quaerit*/ Augustine/, for their sakes that are weak in their understanding, and not enlightened in that faculty, the *Gentiles*; for their sakes who are weake in their *faith*, that come, and heare, and receive light, but *beleeve* not; for their sakes that are preverse in their *manners*, and course of life, that heare and beleeve but practise not, *sol lucernas quaerit*, this light requires testimony.

Donne at Sermons p. 207 et seq.

God made light first. There would have been no purpose to have a world, and creature who reflect God, and no light. But, the light shines in darkness, and the darkness comprehends it not

Mr. Donne continues.

There may be light then and we not know it, because we are *asleep*; and asleep so, as *Jairus daughter* was, of whom Christ says, *the maid is not dead but asleep*. /Matthew 9.24/ The maid was absolutely dead; but because he meant forthwith to raise her, he calls it a sleep. The *Gentiles*, in their ignorance, are *dead*; we, in our *corrupt nature*, dead, as dead as they, we cannot heare the voice, we cannot see the light; without God's *subsequent grace*, the *Christian* can no more proceed, then the *Gentile* can beginne without his *preventing grace*. But, because amongst us, he hath established the *Gospel*, and in the ministry and dispensation thereof, ordinary meanes for the conveyance of his farther grace, we now are but *asleep* and may wake.

All of us are as if dead. We cannot know the light without the grace of God. There are things that might awaken us, and Mr. Donne gives examples: a sudden light brought into the room, a noise, a shaking, a pinching. Most important is the testimony of the messenger of God, the preacher crying out, shaking the soul, troubling the conscience, bearing witness of the light – otherwise, men would sleep it out.

Even so, the awakened man may not listen. He may wink, or even covet darkness because he is wearied of instruction or angry at admonishment. Of rant and bellow sermons that make him feel guilty. Donne says, “*This fastidious and impatient man, longeth for the end of the Sermon, or the end of that point in the Sermon, which is a thorne to his conscience.*”

Anyone weak in faith is like someone who *winks* at the light. He may discern light through his eyelids – but this hint of light is not enough to keep him from stumbling. Even the most determined Atheist may grasp the light, and see that there is God. But they dismiss it. For they who wink, this light requires testimony.

There are those who stare – they see as little with *staring* as the other with winking. “*We may pore upon books, stare upon preachers, yet if we reflect nothing, nothing upon our conversation...our seeing and hearing shall but aggravate our condemnation.*” For those who see but do not *reflect* the light -- this light requires testimony.

If we are neither dead, nor asleep, nor wink, nor look negligently, but come to some degrees of holiness in practice for a time – even so, if at any time we distance ourselves from this light or allow sin to eclipse this light; or if we permit other lights such as honor and glory, popular applause and acclamation to darken our access to the light.... If we are seduced by worldly lights, then we need more Testimony of this light.

Christ bears witness of this light, in establishing a Christian Church, and the Holy Spirit gave

further witness of the light. Yet, many Christians fall into idolatry and superstition and for them the light is eclipsed. They act uncharitably, neglecting, defaming one another. Even though we have the witness of Christ and the Holy Spirit, we need further witness, more testimonies of the light.

There are clouds of ignorance, of incredulity, of infirmity, of relapsing, every day that call this light in question. *You* may doubt whether you have the light, or have seen the light. [Should I try a different check out stand? Would it be faster, more comfortable, less guilt-ridden?]

Every day, then, *you* need to hear witnesses of this light.

You must become Christ's witness to others, by your exemplar life and in holy conversation. By your witness, those who are asleep, or who wink or stare negligently, or are drawn to worldly lights, will see the light of Christ.

Mr. Donne's summation:

In the testimony of the Gospel, written for posterity, *Andrew* is named who sought out his brother *Simon*, and drew *him* in, and so propagated the Church and spread the Glory of God. They who testifie their faith by *works* give us the better comfort, and posterity the better example.

It will be but Christ's first question at the last day, *What hast thou done for me?* If we can answer *that*, he will aske, *What hast thou suffered for me?* And if we can answer *that*, he will aske at last, *Whom hast thou won to me, what soul hast thou added to my Kingdom?* Our thoughts, our words, our doings, our sufferings, if they bring *but our selves* to Heaven, they are not *Witnesses*; our example brings *others*, and that is the purpose, and the end of all we have said, *John Baptist* was a witness to *us*, we are so to *you*, be you so to *one another*.

Amen.

The Rev. Diane Ramerman
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