

TURNING UP THE LIGHTS

A Sermon by the Rev. Dr. Arthur M. Suggs
Preached on Sunday, May 18, 2014

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Don't Awaken Your Fish from the Dark

When I was a kindergarten kid, my dad had a 20-gallon fish tank, or what you would call a community tank, with lots of different kinds of fish in it. One morning we both got up unusually early, before dawn. I went to the tank, which had a roller-type thumb switch for the lights, and turned them on while it was still dark outside. I remember the fluorescent tubes flickered for a moment, and then bam, they came on bright.

As I was looking at the fish, they were jerking around and some of them swam hard into the glass. In a sort of formative moment for me a long time ago, I turned to my dad and asked, "Why'd they do that?" He answered, "Because you scared the bejesus out of them." Not understanding, I said, "What do you mean?" Then he explained, "Pretend that you're lying in your bed, and somebody comes in and turns on the light. Would you like that?"

It had never before dawned on me. It was one of those early moments of feeling empathy for creation. I wanted to apologize to the fish. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to scare the bejesus out of you, and I won't do it again. I will wait for dawn to come before I arise, and I won't turn the light on early." A formative moment for me as a kid.

St. Mark Arrives Buried under Pork; Reburied Under Glass and Gold

The title of the sermon this morning is "Turning up the Lights." I'm going to read you a story that half of you may have heard before because I use it to begin my "Science and Religion" lectures. This story is very meaningful to me. It's by John Barrow, a Cambridge professor of math and physics, a superbrainiac kind of guy. He received the Templeton prize for progress in religion in 2006, and so at his awards dinner in March, he began his acceptance speech with this story:

"A little over a year ago, I [Barrow] was in a great church, the Basilica of St. Mark in Venice. Its predecessor was raised in the year 832 to house the mortal remains of St. Mark the Evangelist, which had supposedly been brought to Venice from Alexandria four years earlier by two merchants. They are alleged to have hidden the remains of the martyred saint under layers of pork to avoid the attentions of the Muslim customs officials."

[AMS: The present Byzantine Basilica, a distinctive cluster of low domes, was begun in the year 1063, so the church at this point is 230 years old. This addition was begun in 1063 and consecrated in 1089, so 26 years were spent in building this improvement and addition onto the old church.]

“I arrived at the church in the early evening with a small group of other scientists for a guided tour after it had closed to the visitors for the day. When we entered, it was almost in total darkness. There are few windows, and those are small and far from transparent. We were asked to sit in the center, allowing just a few faint floor lights and electric candles to guide us to our seats. Above us, only darkness.

“And then, very slowly, the light levels rose. Above us, around us, the interior began to be illuminated by a discreet system of hidden sodium lights. The darkness around us gave way to this spectacular golden light. The arching ceilings above us were covered in a spectacular, gleaming mosaic of glass and gold. Between the 11th and the 15th Centuries, nearly 11,000 square feet of gold mosaic was made, square by square.”

[AMS: To give you a feeling for it, 11,000 square feet is about four times the square footage of our sanctuary. The artisans mixed gold with glass to produce a sparkling, golden feeling by a delicate process that’s still not fully understood. But then Barrow begins to think about it.]

“On reflection,” he writes, “what was more striking to me was the realization that the hundreds of master craftsmen who had worked for four centuries to create this fabulous site had never seen it in its full glory. They worked in the gloomy interior by candlelight and oil lamps, sometimes smoky oil lamps, to illuminate the small area on which they worked, but not one of them had ever seen the full glory of the golden ceiling. For them, like us 500 years later, appearances can be deceptive. The universe is a bit like that too.”

And then Barrow goes on with the rest of his acceptance speech.

Turning up the Lights To Illuminate Your Path

The advantage in turning up the lights is that one can see more and can see more clearly. But an issue arises with better illumination upon one’s path: The issue is that one needs to integrate what is now seen that wasn’t seen before. Let me speak plainly. I feel that the lights have been coming on especially brightly in this last century. Here are some of the incredible developments that have come to light –I use that phrase intentionally – in this century:

- ☞ It was about a century ago that Einstein published the four papers that made him famous, on the subjects of relativism; relativity, general and specific; and quantum mechanics,

the insights of which have been filtering down into the population of the world over this last century. The process is not complete, but it's still happening.

☞ In addition, even though Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* was published in the 1850's, it was mostly during the last century that the ideas of deep time; evolution; and natural selection, read in tooth and claw, have found their way into the imagination of the average person on the street.

☞ In the last couple of decades alone, the incredible insight born of string theory is that basically it seems as though there are eleven dimensions in which we exist. The mathematics behind this theory are well beyond the scope of the sermon. But eleven dimensions! We live in four of them, three spatial and one time, and there are a fifth, a sixth, a seventh, and so on.

One thing that is known by virtually everybody about dimensions is that each is infinitely more in scope than the preceding one. So a plane is infinitely more than a line, and a volume is infinitely more than a plane. People get that. But there are yet an eighth, a ninth, a tenth, and even an eleventh in the magnificence of this world in which we live.

☞ As if that weren't enough, in the 1940's the Nag Hammadi texts and the Dead Sea Scrolls were discovered. And the religious world got rocked by an 8.0 earthquake. We realized that the Bible is what it is pretty much because so much was taken out as a result of really petty politics. What God had said – never mind what God is still saying – what God had said in holy writs of all kinds were also discovered in the last century.

☞ And how about the Internet? Ours is the first generation ever to be almost universally connected, such that I could e-mail somebody in China or Moscow or sub-Saharan Africa. And the news of the death of a famous person goes across the globe in about a second.

☞ We now have a telescope, twenty or twenty-five years old, that has taken images of the universe that we had no idea about, including what is named the Hubble Deep Field, which has now led astronomers to estimate the number of galaxies at 10^{13} (give or take a dozen or so).

It was in the 1920's, between the two World Wars, when we first realized that we live in a galaxy. We haven't known that for even a century yet. And it was only about four years later that the very first galaxy, Andromeda, named after a beautiful Ethiopian

princess of Greek mythology, was discovered. And now it's 10^{13} galaxies of which we're aware. A billion is 10^9 , so now we have at least ten thousand billion galaxies. (I feel like Carl Sagan.) The dimmer switch has been cranked – hard and fast.


Think about this list of incredible insights, which is by no means all-inclusive: relativism; relativity, general and specific; quantum mechanics; evolution; eleven dimensions; Nag Hammadi and the Dead Sea Scrolls; the Internet; and the Hubble Deep Field. I challenge you to compare that list with any other century in the history of humanity. God apparently took the dimmer switch and cranked it hard and fast. And we're like little guppies banging into the glass, having the bejesus scared out of us.

How are we to think religiously in this context, with the light turned up so bright? For thousands of years, God has pretty much been made in the image of humanity. We take an idealized human being, we make him eternal, we make him superstrong, and that must be our God. But God is not a singular being, a superbeing living somewhere in the universe, or maybe outside of it, having the same emotional needs and subject to the same emotional turmoil as humans. That which is God can't be hurt or damaged or disappointed and thus has no need to seek revenge or impose punishment.


Concepts of Divinity: Among Kindergarteners

The way we think about God varies, of course, starting with kindergarteners, as I was when I turned on that light in the fish tank. The following list is one of those things off the Internet that I have found hilarious. Teachers asked kindergarteners to write God a question, put it on a Post-it note, and then they put all the Post-its up for everyone to see.

Here are a few of them. As you listen to these questions or statements about God, dig beneath the surface and imagine the responders' conceptions of what divinity is:

 Dear God, I bet it's very hard for you to love all of everybody in the whole world. There's only four in our family, and I can't do it.

 Dear God, Did you mean for the giraffe to look like that, or was it an accident?

 Dear God, In Bible times, did they really talk that fancy?

 Dear God, Please send Dennis Clark to a different camp this year.

 Dear God, Thank you for the baby brother, but what I prayed for was a puppy.

✍ Dear God, Please put another holiday between Christmas and Easter. There's nothing good in there now.

✍ Dear God, I went to this wedding, and they kissed right in church. Is that okay?

✍ Dear God, Instead of letting people die and having to make new ones, why don't you keep the ones you have now?

✍ Dear God, You don't have to worry about me. I always look both ways.

Concepts of Divinity:

Time to Upgrade

When you get a feeling for kindergarteners' perceptions of God like a superparent, and considering the vast number of achievements that have come to pass in the last century, from Einstein all the way to the Hubble Deep Field, maybe it's time for us to download and upgrade our conception of God.

In this connection, I'd like to share with you a new insight. It comes from the Kabala, Jewish mysticism that originated in the Middle Ages, in the 1500's or maybe a little before that. Mysticism is found universally through the traditions of the world's religions. The Kabala that I want to tell you about is unusually clear in its views of mysticism, but some of the other mystical traditions aren't particularly clear.

The Kabala has the notion of four worlds. I've talked to you before about the word "olam," which in Hebrew means so much: world, universe, infinity, eternity, Einsteinian space-time. (The plural is "olamot": worlds, cosmoses, universes.) All four of these worlds operate at the same time.

The Base or First World of the Four Worlds of the Kabala. Each world has its own understanding of what the human being is, what God is, and what the human-God relationship is. The base, or the first world, is where physicality is the most important thing. The human being is a body. Yes, you might have a spiritual thought now and then, but what you are is a body. And what's important in this life is the increase of pleasure and the decrease of pain. Possessions are part of increasing that pleasure, being that you are a body.

The Fourth World of the Kabala. (Skipping two and three for the time being, I'm also ignoring the Hebrew terms for now.) The fourth world says almost the opposite of the first. No, you're not a body; you are a spirit. You have a body, but who you are, essentially, is a spirit. And that world is fundamentally spiritual. Each human being is a unique manifestation of the soul of God. Possessions are inconsequential. They really don't matter. Why? Because it all belongs to you. So why should this possession be more important than the others? Sensations?

The goal of the fourth world is bliss, but it is bliss mingled with sorrow for those who still choose to suffer.

Now what I found really intriguing about these four levels or worlds, going from the physicality to the spiritual, was the primary metaphor for the god-human relationship. At level one, God is king. And the sexism is part of it: Not queen, king – ruler, lawgiver, judge. And the role of the human being is to be a good slave, an obedient servant.

The Second World of the Kabala. In the second world, God is parent. While half the Bible exists in the mode that God is king, in the other half God is parent. God the father with a definite maternal side. Then the human being is to be a good child, an obedient child. But notice the elevation in status of the human. A child is so much more in terms of social status than a slave or a servant.

The Third World of the Kabala. The third level represents just a tiny bit of the Bible but all of Rumi's's poetry, the Song of Solomon, and, smattered throughout the New Testament is level number three, where the primary metaphor is lovers. Not necessarily equality but parity between the two. And the god-human connection is a loving relationship.

Distinctions Dissolve, Supplanted by New Notions of Divinity; Unity Results

The fourth level is where the distinctions fall away. Not so much the distinction between the lord of the manor and the serf, or between the parent and the child, or between two lovers, but all distinctions begin to dissolve away, and there is only oneness. There is only unity.

In light of the brightness that science and philosophy are shining upon our species at this point, I feel that it is time to upgrade our conception of divinity. "Conception" is an interesting word, actually a biology term. You conceive; you're not done. You're pregnant; you're going to have a baby. But an idea can be implanted. You can conceive of a notion, of an idea, and have it implanted in your mind.

An idea of the holy, of what the sacred is, of what divinity is. And that's what I'm trying to do, to implant into your mind a different notion, a higher notion of what divinity really is. Implant it in your mind, and let it grow. Let it get brighter in our minds as we turn up the dimmer switch. And it then has the gentle presence of the holy spirit, which nourishes and allows that idea to grow into our being.

Amen.