

DARKNESS SHALL NOT OVERCOME

A Sermon by the Rev. Dr. Arthur M. Suggs
Preached on the Fourth Sunday After Epiphany, January 28, 2018

Lectionary Readings: Genesis 1: 1-5 and Matthew 5: 14-16.

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

“Far, we’ve been traveling far without a home, but not without a star.”

“But soft, what light through yonder window breaks? It is the east, and Juliet is the sun.”

“Look to my coming, at first light, on the fifth day. At dawn look to the East.”

He says, “You are the moon of my life.”
And she replies, “My sun and my stars.”

Neil Diamond, *America*; William Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*; J.R.R. Tolkien, Gandolph in *Lord of the Rings*; and George R.R. Martin, *Game of Thrones*, Khal Drogo to his Khaleesi.

LIGHT

Ls a Powerful Metaphor

and a Dynamic Symbol in All Parts of Our Culture

In paintings of every type, the artist plays an unusual dual role by painting light itself as an important motif in the picture and then by

lighting the whole picture. In stage and theater, the art of lighting can spell the pinnacle of performance or the death of dreams. Throughout literature, authors depend on light to excite their insight. I have provided a few examples from various media.

Light permeates its way through all of theological printing and speaking, and it is found virtually everywhere in the sciences. Even a musical concert can be enhanced or ruined by the lighting. The solo spotlight on a piano performance. Or the lasers and the burst of flame at a rock concert. Or, and you’ll find this hard to believe, spotlights on preachers.

Light has pervaded our language:

- “There’s light at the end of the tunnel,” an expression that we use when we’ve been trudging through something, and “Finally there’s a measure of hope at the end.”
- In politics, pretty much every four years or so, we have “The dawning of a new era.” Reagan got a lot of mileage out of “Morning in America.”

- Or we hire an expert to “Shed light on the subject,” whatever it might be.

The imagery infuses our soul as well:

- Starlight to a sailor.
- Sunlight to a prisoner.
- Moonlight to lovers.
- Candlelight to a scholar.
- The light of a campfire to old friends.
- A light in the window to someone who is lost.
- And a thousand other examples.

Here are some samples from the Bible. These are among the few equations of God:

- The First Letter of John, Chapter 1, Verse 5: “God is light.” It doesn’t say, “God is *the* light.” It doesn’t say, “God is *a* light.” It just says, “God *is* light.” God *equals* light. There is only a handful of other equations like this: God is spirit, God is bread, God is love.
- The Letter of Paul to the Philippians, Chapter 2, Verse 15, speaks to the children of God, this is for you: “Shining stars in the sky.”
- The Gospel According to Matthew, Chapter 5, Verse 16: “Let your light so shine before others.” Don’t put a bushel basket over it. Let it shine the way the song says.
- The first Letter of Paul to the Thesalonians, Chapter 5, Verse 5: “You

are children of the light, and children of the day.”

Preacher: I’ve Been Here Long

Enough, and You’ve Heard Me Long Enough to Know That . . .

. . . many of the aspects of standard orthodox Christianity don’t suit me very well. There’s an example with the notion that “God is light.” So it says in The First Letter of John, and then in the Gospel of John, he adds two more verses to it. Now I want to put the three of them together, and you tell me what you think it means:

As mentioned, in his First Epistle, John says, “*God is light.*” But then, in the Gospel According to John, Jesus is recounted as saying, “*I am the light of the world.*” Now bear in mind that he spoke problematically in Aramaic, translated into Greek, and then translated into English. Fortunately, the linguistic construction is identical in all three languages. “I am” is both the belief of referring to “me” or it’s the name of God. Either he’s saying “*I am the light of the world,*” citing himself that he, *Jesus*, is the light of the world, or he might be saying, “*God is the light of the world.*” To add to the confusion, a little later he says, “*You are the light of the world.*”

There’s a part of me that wants to take all this at face value and ask, “How are we to understand this?” And so I’ve got these three thoughts here — “God is light,” “I am

the light of the world,” and “You are the light of the world.” At face value, the only conclusion I can come to is that there is a linkage between our physical being — who we are as homo sapiens, as organisms — and divinity. There's a linkage, an identity linkage, that either we want to deny it or ignore it or just set it aside and never preach on it, but it's there in the background.

A Series of Archetypes:

Here Are Two Lessons from the Notion of Light

We've been looking at deep archetypes that run through scripture, and this is the third in a series. We looked at trees two weeks ago; we looked at mountains a week ago; the notion today is light; and next Sunday it's music. I'd like to offer two lessons from this notion of light, pervading its way through the scriptures but beyond the scriptures, infusing their way into every facet of human existence.

For my first lesson, I'm going to run home on this one and talk about physics. It was at the Nobel prize ceremony of 1929 that the electron was first noted to have a wavelength. This phenomenon was suspected prior to that in the early 1920's and even in the 19-teens, when physicists knew that light exhibited both particle and wave characteristics. But the problem was that they are mutually exclusive. You can't be both. It's either one or the other.

For example, a particle has mass and a wave does not. But researchers were able to show and suspect that this was the real thing, that light was both. It had a wave nature, and it had a particle nature. Finally, in 1929 Louis de Broglie, a French physicist, won the Nobel prize in physics by proving the wave nature of electrons in cosmic symmetry with its particle nature as well.

This eminent achievement enabled others to show that this accomplishment applied to the rest of matter, as well. So here's an electron that clearly is a particle, and De Broglie was able to prove that it also has a wave nature, even though the two natures of the electron are mutually exclusive.

Theologians Picked Up on the

Dual Wave Theory and Decided That Jesus Was a Dual Wave

Beginning in the 1920's and then moving on, theologians picked up on the dual wave and particle nature of electrons and said, “Here is the single best analogy that we've ever had for Jesus. He is both God and a human being. But God and man is mutually exclusive. They're either one or the other.”

However, hundreds of years of theology have said that Jesus is both a hundred percent God and a hundred percent man. That's been a problem until now because finally we've got an example in nature of a perfect analogy for this, something that's a hundred percent wave and a hundred percent particle.

Yes, the Computer Answers;

Yes, Yes, I Am a Wave and a Particle All at the Same Time

Until about three years ago, there was a relatively unknown physicist in Switzerland by the name of Fabrizio Carbone, who is associated with the École Polytechnique Fédérale Lausanne. A sort of genius, he apparently had some totally cool toys to play with. He and his research team were working with the Tokamak Fusion Test Reactor at the Princeton Plasma Physics Laboratory in New Jersey as well as one of the best supercomputers in the world.

Carbone devised an experiment in which he was able to ask of either a photon or an electron, “Are you a wave or are you a particle,” but he was able to ask the same question at the same time. That had never been done before. Nature is extraordinarily accommodating. You ask a photon, “Are you a wave?” It answers back, “Yes,” no matter what the experiment is. You ask an electron, “Are you a wave?” The answer is “Yes.” “Are you a particle?” “Yes.” The answer is always “Yes.” Except that the wave and particles are mutually exclusive. And he was able to ask of a photon, “Are you a wave *and* are you a particle *now*?” And the answer came back, “Yes.”

The method of “asking” the reactor was to capture for the first time ever a single photograph of light behaving as both a wave and a stream of particles. This experiment was

published in March of 2015. The dual theory of light as both particles and a wave was first proposed by Einstein in 1905, 110 years before the proof surfaced.

Now the philosophy of this experiment is yet to be filtered through all of science and all of theology. It’s only three years old, but the immediate understanding of it is that one thing is presenting as two different things. The lesson about this is that there is a deep inherent oneness in matter, creation, and the physical world that we have yet to engrain fully into our hearts and minds and souls. Life is one single thing, as is the rest of creation.

Second Lesson: Light Glows

Like a Sun, Eases the Chronic Pain of a Troubled Woman

The second lesson touched me deeply. At a previous church of mine — First Presbyterian Church, now United Presbyterian Church — for Lent and particularly for Maundy Thursday, there’s a very old traditional service that we do here as well, called the Tenebrae. (Tenebrae is Latin for shadows and darkness.) What you do is to take the gospel story from Palm Sunday up to and including the death, but not including the Resurrection.

You take that story and divide it into fourteen readings, and then on Maundy Thursday, the night of the Last Supper, you read the fourteen verses and extinguish a candle

after each one so that you end up in darkness. The final candle is extinguished when the story tells us about Jesus having breathed his last. That's a powerful, wonderful service.

I was leading that service, and there was a woman in the congregation by the name of Edith, who had been battling chronic pain for many years. She had made several appointments with me to talk about it, and did I ever feel helpless. There was nothing I could say to her; there was nothing I could do to make it better. Just bad pain throughout her body. She had doctored every which way to Sunday to deal with it, and there was no help at all. Edith was there for that service.

In that church, the ceiling comes to a point, and then there's a big archway. In that triangular space up at the top, there is a large painted and gilded Chi-Rho symbol. It's a very ancient iconograph for Christ (the first two letters, XP, of the Greek word for Christ).

She told me later that toward the end of the Tenebrae service the Chi-Rho sign began to glow. There were only two or three of the fourteen candles left, so the sanctuary was getting very dark, and suddenly she's looking up at that symbol, and it seems to be glowing a little. So she's staring at this phenomenon, and it starts to get brighter and brighter and ever brighter, to the point that she couldn't look at it anymore. Apparently no one else in the place saw it. Only she saw it.

I thought to myself that it might be a hallucination, one of those things. Who knows?

Materialists would have a field day with it. But Edith asserted firmly that the thing glowed so effulgently that, in her words, it became like a small sun in the sanctuary, so blazingly brilliant that she could no longer just close her eyes, but rather had to put her arm in front of them to block the super brightness. And it glowed that way, stayed that way until the house lights came up in the sanctuary after the service was over.

Edith Saw a Sun, Waited Months;

What Does the Pain Mean?" After Two Years, Light on Her Path

She waited a couple months before making another appointment with me. Upon telling me the story, she implored, "What does it mean? Does it have anything to do with my pain?" Her chronic hurting had not receded in any measure. "Does it signify something?" I did not know, but we talked at length about what it meant for her. And she came up with two thoughts about the logo:

- One is that she had felt alone in her suffering. She knew that other people were aware of it, but she wasn't sure God knew, let alone cared about it. But she now felt conscious that somehow she wasn't alone in her affliction.
- The second remark was, "I know that it's going to pass away." I

concluded, "Light is a symbol of hope in some way."

Sure enough, about two years later she awakened one day, and the pain was gone. The notion of light at the end of the tunnel came true for her. She had been slogging through a pretty lousy tunnel, saw the light at the end, and knew that her trial of affliction would be over at last.

There was light upon her path, her very painful path. And it became for her personally, not just one of these universal statements, but for her personally, it was the light that shines in the darkness, and the darkness was not able to overcome the light.

Amen.