

Blessed be the Name of God

“What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.”

Most of you know that Amy and I have known the Bishop, his wife and son for a long time. The Bishop was the rector of the parish from which we came two years ago and he was a student of mine at the Episcopal Seminary in Austin TX through the mid '90's. In the year that Greg and Marti finished seminary, their son Austin was born. We have known him all his life.

Last Sunday night, a week ago, Austin was in the cast of Langston Hughes's play, *Black Nativity*, an annual offering at the Moore Theater in Seattle. He sings in the Total Experience Gospel Choir, one of three white people in this more than dynamic singing and praising chorus, and the Gospel Choir was the singing group who animated the play. In fact, Austin sang a duet, which brought tears to the entire Rickel party. [We were all sitting in the first few rows of the theater, smack in the middle!]

I simply cannot tell you of the joy that filled that house. Joy at this young man's gifts, joy at the rhythms and energies of the players, joy at the message of the play, the joy of the season, the joy of our being together. In every way and in every dimension, it was a grace-filled and luminous evening.

Now before the theater, the Bishop and the rest of us ate together at a really fine restaurant, Barolo, within walking distance of the theater. We were ten people and we had a wonderful table, set apart a bit from the rest of the patrons. We had the necessary cloth napkins and sufficient silver ware to confuse us as to forks and such. The wine list was supple and the menu very rich and large, indeed.

But the point of my telling you this really has to do with the management of our menus. The lighting in the restaurant was modest, intimate we might say, as it should have been. At the same time, the low lights did not provide quite enough light for some of us to read the menu.

So, after squinting at our large menus and tipping them just so, to catch what light there was, one after another of us got out our cell phones, each of which had a flashlight feature, and we used those little spot lights to illuminate our culinary future. That is, with the help of those little lights, we knew what to choose for our meal, and what good wine to go with it. Our little lights, sprinkled around our ten person table, our little lights dispelled the darkness, and let us see.

We have, this morning, that wonderful prologue to the Gospel of John, a familiar, rambling and beautiful text intended to testify to the fact that Jesus, the earthy child of Mary, adopted son of Joseph, that Jesus was God. And that as Jesus, he was child of Mary, but as God, he was from the beginning.

“What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness as not overcome it.”

Living in our time and place, we know about darkness. Our rector has done masterfully in recent weeks helping us through the sad coincidence of gun violence in our country, and the coming, yet again, of the Christ Child. He has helped us grasp the fact that it is especially in the face of such darkness that we Christians must assert the truer intentions of God, the safety, health and well being of all people. Now is certainly not the time to shy away from such testimony, he has reminded us, nor is it time to let sorrow win its assault on joy. Many of you have spoken of your gratitude to Nigel for his thoughtful preaching in the face of the fact of darkness that seems to have come so clearly into focus.

It is on the firm foundation that Nigel has laid that I want to build.

In our recent travels, we spent five days with friends who had rented an altogether extravagant house in Oxnard CA, right on the beach, sand at the door. This couple, Steven and Eugene, are dear to us, nearly family, and being with them was a delight! We had lovely times together and enough time apart to make the time together all the more rewarding.

As you might expect, we talked of many things. Steven is a playwright and Eugene is an entrepreneur. They seemingly know everyone, and have thoughtful things to say about virtually everything.

Given the change in the calendar that approaches, one evening, Amy asked if they had any resolutions for the coming year. They explained that they didn't make resolutions but rather chose a single word, a word that would help them focus the coming year, a word that would be their touchstone for actions and decisions that would arise.

When Amy, Steven, Eugene and I had the original discussion, Amy proposed the word “sparkle.” After only a moment, we three men decided that “sparkle” was something Amy could pull off quite readily but that it really didn't capture our prospects very well. But that discussion got me to thinking about this sermon and St. Augustine's.

So, following their good example, I have decided to commend a single word to you, to us, for the year coming, a word that the Scriptures provide and a word that our language allows to be interpreted in what I take to be instructive ways.

“Light.” That is the word I want to give you for the year coming. “Light.” As you let that word inform you, let me give you this exposition on its possibilities.

Firstly, and altogether consistent with Nigel's testimony and the pointed teachings of Scripture, the Light that guides us is a light we are obliged to reveal. The Light of which we are the children, that Light is the light we have promised to carry into the world. To the extent that our little phone lights dispelled the darkness that surrounded those restaurant menus, to that same extent that Light of Christ that is our gift at baptism, that Light we are to shine into the darkness of every dark place and dark time that we encounter.

There is a word I wish I could use to name what I'm asking of you but the word won't work, sad to say. I want to use the word that would mean "Light Bearer" or "Bringer of Light." That's what I'm asking you to do, what I'm proposing that you think of as yourself and your mission for the next year. The word that I can't use, the word that means what I need it to mean, that word is "Lucifer," bearer or bringer of light. And you can see why I cannot commend it to you, but you get the point, I hope.

In this first instance, the word I am proposing is a call to you to be illuminating, to be a light in whatever darkness you find. It is a call to you to testify that God's light is triumphing, and will triumph over every darkness. It is a call to you to be a witness and agent of that light.

In the second instance, and moving into the vagaries of our language, I want this word, "Light," to call to mind what a match does for a stack of firewood when that match is struck on the brick of the hearth. I want you to call to mind the passionate song that Jose Feliciano has sung for years, "Come on, Baby, light my fire."

"Light," meaning ignition, initiating whatever needs life and animation and combustion, setting things in motion.

In this regard, I have a very practical suggestion for the coming year, under the guidance of "light" so understood.

On the 15th of January, we will gather to give thanks for the life of Pete Vandergrift. Pete died some few days ago. Amy and I had visited Pete only a day or two before that, offering to bring him Communion on a regular basis, an idea he thought quite a good one. As sad as we were when Pete died, we were glad that we had seen him before he passed, and that we had offered him a prospect he found rewarding. In a fashion, you see, we were glad for the timing.

What I am proposing is that you "light" a fire in your head and heart to do things that need doing. I'm not thinking so much about cleaning out those closets you've been planning to clean out, though that may not be a waste of time. Rather, I'm urging you to be about staying current in your relationships.

In particular, to those people you love, tell them so. Stay current with them. With those people with whom you are at odds, set things right. Don't leave this sort of thing undone. Stay current. Ignite your will and initiate reconciliation where it is needed. This is the time, right now.

Light as illumination and light as ignition or initiation. Two ways to open yourselves to “light.” The third is this. I guess I would call it “weightlessness,” the opposite of heavy. “Light,” perhaps buoyant, like a feather in the breeze.

In this instance, I don’t mean light-hearted or anything like “lighten up.” I also don’t mean weight loss, though I can imagine resolutions related to that subject. No, I mean something else, something harder to put into words.

As a group, we are people who want to make a difference, to make things better, to make a mark for good and for goodness. Collectively, we strive in this way and in this direction. What I want to add to that striving is a light touch, a willingness to travel through life’s actions and decisions with a graceful light touch such that the good effect we intend survives but our fingerprints are allowed to disappear. Rather like walking through the forest, planting our feet firmly lest we fall, but striding so that the forest is not marked by our visit.

I urge this light strategy in our life with creation and in our life with each other. It will foster the good and the prosperity of others, be that another person or creation itself. A light hand, a light touch.

So, for the future, I give you “light,” and a “light” year, filled with faithful illumination, the ignition of the practice of staying current, and in all things, a graceful and gentle touch. The darkness will not overcome it.

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