

When I was a kid, I was convinced that E.T. lived in the closet of the upstairs den next to my

bedroom. It was a weird sort of fear, E.T. being a friendly alien empath, but I thought E.T. was

scary looking and for some reason, each night before I went upstairs to bed, I would be

overcome by this fearful certainty that he was in the closet in the next room. Perhaps it has to do

with that scene where E.T. hides amongst the stuffed animals in Elliot's sister's closet?

Regardless—I was fearfully certain he was there and also sure that it couldn't be true, but I

refused to simply go look. I was scared that if I turned on the light in the closet, it would illumine

what I was afraid to see—and that if my fear were true, that something terrible would happen.

Instead of letting light show the truth or untruth of my fear, I just tried to ignore it and pretend I

wasn't afraid or that the fear didn't exist, despite dealing with the real consequences each night

of hurriedly getting ready for bed and closing my bedroom door so that E.T. wouldn't come in.

--- We so often without thinking use the concept of "light" to mean "good" or "true" or "free" or to

indicate revelation, insight, or mental illumination. Of course, it makes plenty of sense.

Physically, light is necessary for us to see. It reflects off of objects around us and enters the

cornea, bending to create an upside image on the retina. Our brains translate this image right side

up; we interact with the world around us based on our interpretations of what we see. Think of

reading in a dim room and then turning on a lamp, the words becoming all of a sudden clear; or

maybe trying to find your way from your car to the door in the dark and a motion sensor light

switches on. Such illumination can feel like assurance and relief: I can make out what I had been

straining to before; I can now see the path in front of me.

1

But while it dispels darkness and illumines, in doing so, light can reveal that which we don't ever

care to see: dust, debt, denying a call, regret, the way we've hurt other people, the ways we've

hurt ourselves that we don't want to admit, complacency, all the things I don't want to see about

myself or other people or the world. Light seeps through the cracks, even to the

farthest hidden

back corners of our mind, finding a way to illumine darkness that we shut behind a door, too

afraid of how dark it was and certain that if a light were shined on it, the darkness would swallow

it
up.

In this way, light can feel like a weapon. Maybe you've experienced a sharp stab, hands to face,

when the sun seeps through a crack between blackout shades, or how its rays cut against your

slivered eyes when leaving a movie matinee on a sweltering summer day. It can take a little

while for our eyes to adjust. When one has been in darkness for most of the time, even a little

light can feel like an offense, an intrusion on our comfort in the dim.

Today at House of Mercy we are celebrating Candelmas, or the festival of the Presentation of our

Lord, commemorating Mary's purification and Jesus's dedication in the temple as recorded in

Luke chapter 2—February second is the feast day for this occasion. In churches throughout the

world, traditionally it is a day for blessing of candles used throughout the coming

year, and in

celebration of Jesus the Light of the World. It is in Luke Chapter 2, the story of Jesus's

presentation in the temple, that we hear the words of Simeon, an old man to whom it has been

revealed by the Holy Spirit that he will see the Messiah before he dies.

2

Upon seeing Jesus and Jesus's parents in the temple, Simeon takes the infant into his arms and

proclaims the words used in the famous canticle often used in Vespers and Compline prayer, the

Nunc Dimmitis: Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace, according to your word;

for my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, a

light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel." Following his song of

praise, Simeon speaks to Mary regarding the child Jesus: "This child is destined for the falling

and the rising of many in Israel and to be a sign that will be opposed, so that the inner thoughts

of many shall be revealed."

Simeon names two important things about Jesus in this passage that I want to draw your attention

to: First, Simeon celebrates that he has seen God's salvation in Jesus, who is for all peoples a

light. Secondly, Simeon reveals some of what this light will do. Jesus the Light will not be one

who is accepted, despite—and because of— the illumination emanating from him; rather he is a

sign that will be opposed. Jesus the light will reveal the inner thoughts of many—and these

revelations of inner thoughts are not things that people generally want out in the open.

I'm hoping that the text that was just read before I began to speak sounds familiar to you. Does

it? This week's assigned text in the lectionary is the second half of the episode read last Sunday.

Luke tells us that Jesus has begun his ministry in Galilee, and has been going around the hamlets

of the region teaching.

His visit to his hometown Nazareth his first sermon that is recounted in Luke. While last week

you may have heard just Jesus's sermon, in the latter half of the story—the part appointed for

today—we learn about the reaction of those who hear Jesus's message.

It's a dramatic story, to say the least.

Jesus, according to his custom, went to the synagogue on the sabbath day, and presumably as the

esteemed hometown boy of growing fame, is accorded the honor to read the text for the day.

Reading from Isaiah, Jesus takes on the voice of the prophet. "The Spirit of the Lord is upon

me," he reads, "because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to

proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to

proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."

When Jesus then proclaims that “today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing” the

crowd is abuzz. Jesus has just insinuated that he is a prophet filled with the Holy Spirit—or even

more shockingly, that he God’s Messiah himself, the anointed one. Folks are starting to feel

amazed, maybe incredulous and confused, and likely proud: this is *our* guy. Certainly *we* are

special because Jesus is from *our* town. We own him. But prophets in the Bible are neither

fortune tellers nor future-casters; instead true prophets are truth-tellers about God and people.

They cast light in places that need illumination; their words are full of honest conviction. They

proclaim what is real and reveal the hope in God’s presence. And prophet’s words are almost

never—if ever—welcome. Light reveals that which we’d rather not see.

4

And God sees what we don’t see, whether that non-seeing is done ignorantly or willfully.

Remember that as Jesus is dedicated in the temple, Simeon proclaims that Jesus will reveal the

inner thoughts of many and will be opposed for it. Jesus will be a light for the nations, bringing

freedom and healing, and yet will be opposed *for it*. Because what does freedom require?

Admitting that there is something from which to be freed. Already in the first full episode of

Jesus's ministry in Luke, this proclamation of Simeon's is fulfilled, and will continue to be so.

As not just a prophet revealing God's truth but the holy one of God, the Messiah, Jesus shines a

light directly on the thoughts of those gathered who would have Jesus be only for them. I can see

what you're thinking, Jesus says. But I'm not here to perform magic tricks, and I'm certainly not

here for your accolades or to be objectified into whatever you would have me be. I'm here to

fulfill the year of God's favor for all peoples, not to satisfy whatever will make you most

comfortable. Light's illumination does not discriminate.

Jesus is provocative, certainly. Might he knew his self-comparison to Elijah and Elisha might rile

up the crowd? Was that part of the point? Was this some sort of performative theater piece

planned to really rub people the wrong way or to be sensational, like Ezekiel physically

eating a

scroll or Isaiah wandering around naked for three years as a sign for what was happening in the

geo-political landscape of the time? Regardless, the crowd doesn't like at all what Jesus's words

have revealed about them. In fact, the crowd's reaction is so severe that one can feel the rush of

their anger, the extremity of their abrupt shift from words of amazement to a raging stampede.

They are so upset, so incensed, their anger so intense, that they drive Jesus to the edge of a cliff.

Clearly, he has seen them—really seen them—shed light on them, and they are not pleased. So

displeased, in fact, that they would have him die.

5

While it is amusing to think that after all of this, Jesus does indeed to some sort of "magic,"

performs some sort of Jedi mind manipulating sleigh-of-hand to "pass through the midst of

them," I think that the crowd is simply too angry, too overcome by their denial about a truth that

they didn't want to have revealed or spoken that they can't see the living and breathing Truth and

Light standing amidst them. Too blinded by their defensiveness and rage, they shield their eyes

from the bright beams of Jesus, and he goes on his way.

John is the gospel that perhaps one would most readily associate with light. But seeing—or the

lack thereof—is a prominent theme in Jesus’s ministry and parables in Luke. And it is not just

metaphorical in Luke, but light that is embodied in the *person* of Jesus, Jesus that reveals and

redeems, absolves and heals. Right now in the church year, we are in the time after Epiphany, a

word which means “manifestation,” and it is the celebration of God’s self, made concrete in the

person of Jesus. If at times “God” seems like an ambiguous and far-away abstraction, during the

time after Epiphany, the stories we hear each week help us to see God made concrete, real, and

close. God is here; Jesus says: Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing. Today, we

participate, we are witnesses to God’s fulfilled promise in the presence of Jesus. In this moment,

“the year of the Lord’s favor” is here, now. And the year of the Lord’s favor means

reconciliation. It means Jesus shines a light on us, sees what we don’t, or don’t

want to see,

names it, and says: this is the year of jubilee. I see all of you, even the places you don't want

revealed, and I love you.

6

But Jesus's light simply isn't safe or comfortable in the ways we'd like it to be. Healing is not a

passive activity, and as demonstrated by the crowd in the gospel today, it is often actively

rejected. The crowd in Nazareth—we—would rather not see or admit what is revealed by the

light of Christ—that we are not God, that God is not an object we can hold onto and control, that

we need healing, that we need to be made whole by God's love, that we are ensnared by rules

and "shoulds" and pride and who others need us to be.

In the following chapters of Luke, the Pharisees are swimming in a similar denial, wanting to be

seen as good, righteous for their deeds and behavior, not wanting to admit that their actions are

not more powerful than God. Those who come to Jesus and are healed—a leper, a woman who

cannot stop bleeding, a paralytic, a woman who washes Jesus's feet with her tears, multitudes

with demons and all sorts of ailments of the body and soul; they come ready to admit that they

are not whole and are not in control, that no matter how hard they try by force of will to banish

their shadows or hide in darkness, they cannot. They come, not invested in proving their worth,

but in faith, which itself a gift, trusting that illumination and the love and forgiveness of God will

bring about the healing they so desperately crave. And when Jesus proclaims to his hometown:

this is the year of the Lord's favor, Jesus is saying—this healing is for you all here too.

But Good News is not so easy. It convicts us, demands something of us, not to act so that we

might merit healing, but to see that we need it. If you are accustomed to darkness, light feels like

a weapon. If you've been steeped in the depths of self-involved loathing, real love can feel a

toxic
shock.

And if we're told, along with the Nazoreans, by the Jesus the Light: I am God and you are not,

and my love means freedom to the captives and true sight. I see all of you, even the places you

don't want revealed, and I love you—it might mean we have to admit what that light reveals

about
us.

Thus, the reality of God's ever-shining merciful light can cause us to retreat, to be defensive, to

demand that we be seen as good, to fight and fight and toss Jesus off a cliff and to cry, "Crucify

him!" We do anything to admit that we need God, or that God's love frees us to be whole and

holy
people.

Thankfully, Jesus's abounding mercy overcomes everything, including our refusal to admit that

we need it. As Luther writes in his explanation of the third article of the Apostle's Creed, we

believe that we cannot by our own understanding or strength believe in Jesus or come to him, but

that we are called, enlightened, and made holy by God. We don't have to be afraid of facing all

that may be illumined by light—whether it is an imagined alien or our deepest secret fear—

because Jesus has promised that he brings good news, freedom from oppression, healing, honest

sight, and reconciliation. Indeed, today amongst us, and every day, this promised is fulfilled.