

“Live, Light”
23 February, 2014
Epiphany 7
Leviticus 19:1-2, 9-18
Matthew 5:38-48
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Prayer:

Giver of Light, dispel our darkness. Open our eyes, our hearts, our ears, our minds. Shine forth, and may your word be heard. Amen.

Although the picture panels on the side walls of our sanctuary have been cleaned and repainted—gone is the beautiful image that developed week by week across Advent, culminating on the first Sunday of Epiphany with the Wise Men journeying through the darkness toward the star overhanging the Messiah’s dwelling place—we are nonetheless still making our way through the liturgical season of Epiphany. This is the penultimate Sunday of that season: in a week and a half, Christians around the world will observe Ash Wednesday, and that will mark the beginning of our season of Lent.

Whereas Lent invites us to look inward more intentionally and penitentially, Epiphany could be considered to have an outward focus, watching for and leaning into, and ultimately endeavouring to embody the LIGHT of the world.

And so today, on this next-to-last Sunday of Epiphany, we’ve appropriately been prompted by Wendy’s testimony to consider where we see the light. As with all of the faith journey testimonies that have been shared in our community across the past several years, I’m grateful for what Wendy was willing to disclose of her experience—and for the ways in which it helps us to reflect on our own experience, by way of similarity and contrast.

“From the beginning,” Wendy shared, “fear of darkness.”

Isn’t that something that we (who largely take our vision for granted) all hold in common? Fear of darkness. Although there may be a bit of curiosity about it, don’t we—on the whole—experience a discernible anxiety about situations that plunge us into an absence of light, where we cannot see or navigate with confidence; where our sense of competence and command over our surroundings is removed?

No matter how many decades of experience we have in this world, when we’re introduced to the various forms of darkness that life presents, most of us are reduced to our toddler-aged self, crying out in one way or another for a night-light, or at least for the presence of someone else in the room with us. The threat of darkness is rooted in our feeling of smallness, powerlessness in the face of a great unknown.

I don’t know about you, but there have been moments across the past week when I’ve felt like that daunted toddler as I’ve observed the world around me, not knowing what to think or make of it all.

I've witnessed images of dark, billowing clouds smouldering over Kiev as a young, well-dressed Ukrainian businessman delivers empty glass bottles to help replenish the protest movement's supply of firebombs. "A week or even a few days ago, I would never have seen myself doing this," he says, "now, I am ready to bring not just bottles but also gasoline. Of course, I don't like violence. What's happening is very sad. But violence is just a response to violence on the other side."¹ What kind of darkness is this—and yet, why does it seem so familiar?

The breath-taking acceleration of that nation's descent into relative anarchy is becoming an increasingly common phenomenon—and the dark shadows that emerge from revolting people inevitably flow beyond their own borders and seep into the societies, and the world, around them.

In that same vein, I've seen images of Syrian refugees, traumatised and malnourished, desperate to be accepted into any land that will assure them of safety, asylum, security. I've noted the light-bearing letter from church leaders (including from our United Reformed Church) exhorting David Cameron to reconsider the government's current policy to accept "up to 500 of the most traumatised Syrians"—and instead recognise our moral responsibility to resettle a much more significant number of them here—even in excess of 1,000. We certainly possess the material wealth and resources to be able to provide for them, as well as continuing the aid and support we send to foreign nations closer to Syria that are first ports of call for the desperate and the fleeing.

Then again, it's impossible to ignore the darkness at home—the grievous treatment that some of our own receive right here in this land. The news this past week has been filled with reports and editorials denouncing the U.K. government's appalling state of denial and callousness toward our most vulnerable, toward the working poor, the disabled, many children, and the elderly.

For the past several weeks, we've been focusing intently on issues of justice and peace as a church community. But we're not the only ones voicing alarm and condemnation for the state of affairs created by the government's crippling cuts to social benefits and safety-net funding. This past Thursday (20 February), an open letter from leaders in the Anglican, Methodist, United Reformed, and Quaker churches decried the condition of our society, where more than half a million people have visited food banks since Easter last year; where 5,500 have been admitted to hospital with malnutrition, and 20% of mothers are skipping meals to better feed their children. Bishop Vincent Nichols, the head of the Roman Catholic Church in England and Wales, described the government's welfare reforms as 'a disgrace.'

David Cameron's claim that these cuts are part of a "moral mission . . . to bring purpose, opportunity, hope, and yes, responsibility to people who had previously been written off" simply does not reflect, to my mind, a leader who is sincerely in touch with what is really happening—and it demonstrates a complete lack of connection with an ethic of social concern.

Meanwhile, another of yesterday's headlines declared, "Britain's bank bosses to get millions in share payments in bonus cap dodge." Despite reporting massive profit slumps,

¹ http://www.nytimes.com/2014/02/21/world/europe/protesters-join-fight-in-kiev-100-at-a-time.html?nl=todaysheadlines&emc=edit_th_20140221&_r=2

“the bosses of Britain’s biggest banks are on course to be awarded millions of pounds in share payments to circumvent a Brussels-imposed bonus cap. . . .” The government’s promises to crack down on massive tax evasion, to close loopholes and eradicate many exemptions for the wealthiest have simply gone unfulfilled even as the crackdown on those who lack the wherewithal to defend themselves has intensified.

The darkness is real. It can feel fearsome and overbearing, disorientating, even paralyzing: which way to go? Where to start? What if we just go in circles, how will we ever find our way out of this mess? I read these things, I hear these stories, and I confess: my heart can tremble at “the gathering gloom of malevolent malady’s merciless march.”

“The Lord spoke to Moses, saying: Speak to all the congregation of the people of Israel and say to them: You shall be holy, for I the LORD your God am holy.” This is how our first lesson opened. We heard it vaguely echoed in our Gospel lesson, didn’t we—where Jesus said, “Be perfect, . . . even as your heavenly Father is perfect.” (Matthew 5:48)

I want to pause just for a moment and look closely at the Leviticus passage. God tells Moses, “Speak to all the congregation . . . and say to them: You shall be holy, for I the LORD your God am holy.” Notice that, while the mood of ‘you shall’ is imperative, it may also be taken as declarative. What could feel daunting or imposing or downright impossible, becomes hope-filled and life-giving when we read it that way—as a declarative statement. “You shall be holy, for I the LORD your God am holy.”

Here’s how Presbyterian minister Sheldon Sorge explains it: “The Holy One says, ‘In company with me, you shall grow to be like me.’ As the psalmist reminds us [in Psalm 115], we become like what we worship (Ps. 115:8). This correspondence of God’s people to God’s self goes beyond the *imago Dei* present in every human being. It is a likeness to the *otherness* of God, a way of being distinguished from the rest of humanity. Even as God fills all things, yet is wholly other, so God’s people are very much part of humanity, set apart. This passage depicts a way of life that is pointedly *different* from the ways of the world.”

. . . The work of being holy is exactly that: work, swimming against the tide of prevailing human ways. . . . When we look in the mirror collectively and individually, we see how far short we fall of the holiness toward which we are destined, and we could all too easily give up, but for hearing again and again God’s promise: “You *shall* be like me.”²

How will God’s people know that they behaving like God? Well, the Leviticus passage goes on to spell out some basic rules or behaviours that would demonstrate divine holiness:

“When you harvest your land, don’t go right up to the very edges of your field, or gather the gleanings of your harvest. Don’t strip your vineyard bare or go back and pick up the fallen grapes. Leave them for the poor and for the foreigner. I am GOD, your God.” (Lev. 19:9-10)

God’s economy is one of abundance, one that refuses to keep everything for him- or herself, but rather leaves the easy pickings for someone to whom easy pickings will be a potential grace. God’s economy is rooted in generosity and thoughtfulness for the other; not concerned with maximising profit, or with judgment of the one who comes in search of charity.

2 Sheldon W. Sorge, *Feasting on the Word, Year A*, vol. 1, p. 364.

Immediately after instructing the people to leave the gleanings, God instructs the people, “Don’t steal”—implying that the poor or alien person who comes to glean has a right to those crops, as the earth and all that is in it is God’s, and God has given the yield in the first place.

The Leviticus lesson is significant, not only because it so clearly and profoundly shapes Jesus’ own teaching, but also because of its symbolic physical location. This passage represents the kernel of the Torah (Jewish teaching) known as the Holiness Code: it’s at the centre of the book of Leviticus, which in turn is the third (centre) of the five books of the Pentateuch. Thus, in a sense, this passage represents the heart of Jewish teaching.³

I also suggest to you that the Gospel lesson for today is much more easily understood and absorbed when read alongside the passage from Leviticus—especially when we keep in mind what was said about growing to be like God as we spend time in the Holy One’s company. The teaching of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount, which arguably represents the core of his instruction, also represents Jesus’ radical revisioning of our world: he saw and embodied God’s original hope and dream for this world. It’s a vision whose power and sense can grip an individual or a community an instant, but it refashions us across a lifetime. As we spend time in the Master’s company—people seeking the divine light and allowing ourselves to become enfolded and inhabited by perfect love—we become purer in love, ever more like the perfect love, who is God.

As we journey through the final days of this Christian season of Epiphany, continue to watch for the light—capture and nurture the sparks you see into flickering flames. Revolutions and civil unrest, political corruption and callous governments and avarice and disregard for the poor, the disabled, the vulnerable, the alien, the other—these realities have always been with us, like some sustained, tedious shroud of darkness.

But remember: a Light has been given to the darkness of this world, and the darkness has not—nor can it ever—overcome it. The Light shines within us, not by our own power, but by the grace and presence of the God who chooses to keep company with us. And as we keep company with God in Christ Jesus, we will come more and more to resemble his light and life.

As Christian voices join together, sparks begin to fly and they give rise to brilliant flame, a powerful light that the world can neither hide nor quench. See if you don’t glimpse it in church and national initiatives reaching out in compassionate response to the shattered people of Syria and Ukraine and beyond. Watch for it closer to home as efforts are pooled to address the needs of those on the margins of our own society.

See if you don’t glimpse it here, in the open letter to David Cameron from the church leaders I referred to earlier. In it they wrote, “*On March 5th Lent will begin. The Christian tradition has long been at this time to fast, and by doing so draw closer to our neighbour and closer to God.*”

On March 5th we will begin a time of fasting while half a million regularly go

³ Jin Hee Han, *ibid.*, p. 363.

hungry in Britain. We urge those of all faith and none, people of good conscience, to join with us.

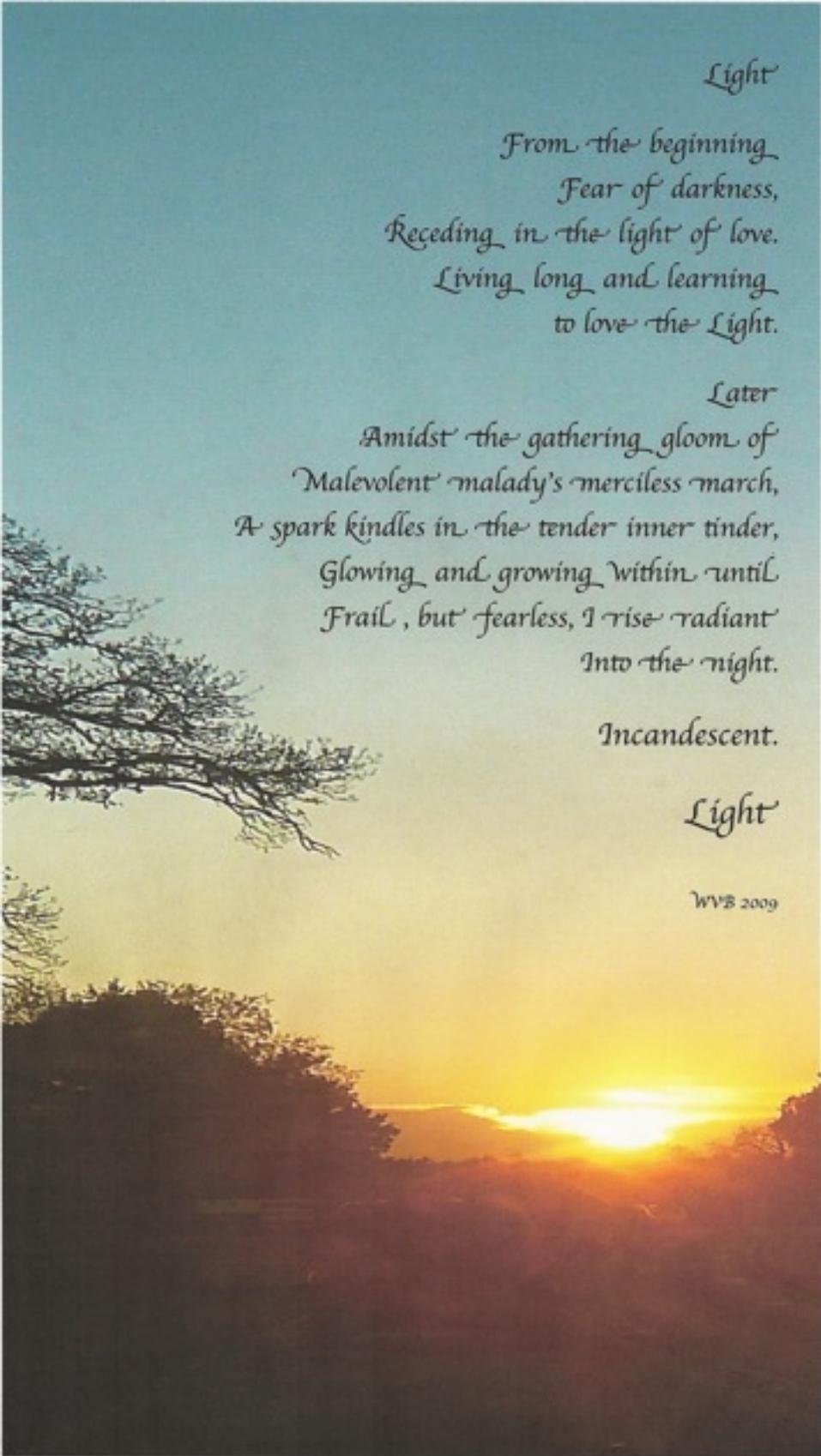
There is an acute moral imperative to act. Hundreds of thousands of people are doing so already, as they set up and support foodbanks across the UK. But this is a national crisis, and one we must rise to.

We call on government to do its part: acting to investigate food markets that are failing, to make sure that work pays, and to ensure that the welfare system provides a robust last line of defence against hunger.”

They invite all of us to participate in a national campaign called End Hunger Fast, and are calling for a national day of fasting on April 4th. You can find more details at www.endhungerfast.co.uk. You can also participate in the Fairtrade Fortnight which begins tomorrow, drawing awareness to the justice, fairness, and real-love issues embedded in the food we eat and the products we regularly consume.

Let the love of God flow, live as people drawn to—and ultimately one with—the Light.

[Conclusion: Wendy’s Poem, on next page]



Light

*From the beginning
Fear of darkness,
Receding in the light of love.
Living long and learning
to love the Light.*

Later

*Amidst the gathering gloom of
Malevolent malady's merciless march,
A spark kindles in the tender inner tinder,
Glowing and growing within until
Frail, but fearless, I rise radiant
Into the night.*

Incandescent.

Light

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