

A sermon preached by The Rev. Robert L. Tate, Priest Associate, at the Philadelphia Episcopal Cathedral on 5 Epiphany, Sunday, February 6, 2011.

I.

Jesus said, “You are the light of the world.”

Light is one of the great mysteries of existence.

Scientists are still struggling to understand light, exactly what it is and exactly how it works. The word for light in Greek is “photon.” The ancient Greeks posited the idea that light is made up of countless photons, infinitesimally small visible particles. In 1905 Albert Einstein theorized that a photon is a bundle of energy released when an electron jumps from a larger to a smaller sized orbit around a nucleus. Then Einstein showed that the behavior of a photon was more like a wave than a particle. Today scientists generally agree that light behaves both like a particle and a wave. As the light waves move through space they give off both electrical and magnetic energy, thus the term electromagnetic waves.

Visible light is in the middle range of a vast electromagnetic spectrum of frequencies or wavelengths. At the low end of the spectrum are radio waves, the lowest energy, lowest frequencies, longest wavelengths, which include TV, cell phones, cable and DSL. Next are the infrared waves that run your TV remote control. Then the microwaves that cook your food. Visible light, red at the low end, violet at the high end, travels at 186,000 miles per second in a vacuum, so the light of the stars in the sky has taken millions of light years to reach the earth. Next is the ultraviolet light that gives you sunburns. Then x-rays which pass through flesh but not bone. And finally, at the high end, with the highest energy, highest frequencies and shortest wavelengths, are gamma rays, billions of which are right now passing straight through the earth, through these stone walls and through our bodies, almost as if solid matter were nothing but empty space—which, on the atomic level, it is.

Of course, part of the miraculous nature of light has to do with the evolution of the eye and the brain, the ability of humans and animals to “see” certain frequencies of electromagnetic radiation and interpret the patterns. I was very moved last Sunday, at our congregational meeting, when our new staff

person for Children and Youth Ministries, Meredith Wiggins, described so graciously how her ability to see has diminished to the point that she is almost blind.

And here again, light is paradoxical. When we see something red, actually that red object is every other color but red. It is actually absorbing all the other colors and reflecting only the red wavelengths back to our eyes.

Something that looks white actually has no intrinsic color; it is reflecting back all the colors of the spectrum. Isaac Newton first showed that a beam of white light shining through glass of different thicknesses, a prism, or shining through the curved surface of a raindrop, divides into the entire spectrum of visible light, all the colors of the rainbow.

So something that looks black is actually not reflecting any light. It has no color. It is absorbing all the colors of the rainbow so none are reaching your eyes. A black hole in the universe is a collapsed star or galaxy that is so dense that it absorbs all light.

II.

We are now in the middle of the liturgical season of Epiphany. Epiphany comes from a Greek word meaning “a showing forth.” In Greece, the Day of Epiphany, January 6th, is called “i imira ton foton,” literally “The Day of Light.” The season of Epiphany tells the story of the “showing forth” of Jesus. From the star in the sky that guided the magi to the place of Jesus’ birth, to his baptism where John proclaimed him as the long awaited Messiah, to his short three-year earthly ministry: his inspired preaching, teaching, and healing “showing forth” the spirit and the presence of God.

According to all four of the Gospels, Jesus constantly used the metaphor of light to describe the Holy Spirit of God.

In John 8, Jesus says, “I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness and will have the light of life.”

And in today’s Gospel passage from Matthew 5, Jesus extends the metaphor and says, “You are the light of the world.”

What I hear in these passages is Jesus telling us not to absorb the light of Christ, but to reflect it back to the world. Not to be a black hole but a supernova, one of the newest, brightest stars in the universe.

“Let your light so shine before others that they may see your good works and give glory to God in heaven.” In other words, let the light of Christ transform you and your life, and then let that light shine forth in the way you live your life, in your good works.

It is the same message that the prophet Isaiah was proclaiming thousands of years ago: “If you offer your food to the hungry and satisfy the needs of the afflicted, then your light shall rise in the darkness and your gloom be like the noonday.”

This little light of mine, I’m going to let it shine!

Hide it under a bushel, NO! I’m going to let it shine!

And when people see you living a transformed life, when they see your good works, when they see the light and the life and the love of Christ in you, they will give glory to the source, to God in heaven.

III.

How perfect is it that this morning we have the opening of a wonderful new art exhibit entitled “Finding Light, Inviting Light?”

I have known and admired the artist, Robin Janning, for years. For ten years I have served on the Board of Episcopal Church and the Visual Arts, EVCA, which supports visual arts programming in the life of the church. For years I have admired Robin’s paintings in the virtual exhibits that appear regularly on the ECVA website. I especially loved one of her paintings that was projected on a screen beside the altar at General Convention in Columbus in 2006. I have used another as my screensaver on my home computer for years. A few years ago, Robin volunteered to become the Communications Director of ECVA and the Editor in Chief of the website. And more recently she has become the Editor of the Art Blog on the Episcopal Cafe website.

I knew that if I ever got the opportunity, I would find a way to exhibit her work, which has not often been exhibited. So today is the fulfillment of a dream for me. And for Robin.

On Friday, Anne Minich and I hung the show. It was wonderful working with Anne, a professional artist, deciding together which paintings would look best in various parts of this amazing, architectural space that is our Philadelphia Cathedral. I was fascinated hearing which pieces Anne liked the best and why. It was inspiring looking at Robin's actual paintings, not just digital images, for the first time.

“Finding Light, Inviting Light.” After the service, following some time for refreshments and fellowship, I invite you to pick up one of the sheets on the table in the corner, and wander around the exhibit. Open your eyes. Find the light. Find the light, the spirit, that Robin is reflecting into your eyes. Invite the light. Invite the light inside, into your heart, into your soul. And then allow the light to transform you and change your life.

At about 11:30 am I am going to hook up a laptop here at the ambo and try to get Robin on skype so we can meet her and talk with her about her artwork.

Jesus said, “You are the light of the world. Let your light so shine before others that they may see your good works and give glory to God in heaven.”

Amen

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