



The Rev. Dr. Don Skinner
March 26, 2017
“Light for the World”

*Drain from us now, holy God, all preoccupation with trivial things,
enabling us—with reverent diligence—to attend to things eternal. Amen.*

A young mother was concerned about her kindergarten son walking to school. Timmy didn't want his mom to walk with him; and she wanted him to develop some self-reliance, to feel that he had some independence. But she still wanted to know that he was safe.

So she asked a neighbor, another young mother, to follow Timmy to school each morning, staying at a distance so he wouldn't notice her.

The neighbor agreed. She was up early with her own toddler anyway, and it would be a good way for them to get some exercise.

The next school day, the neighbor and her toddler set out, following Timmy as he walked to school with a little girl who also attended kindergarten. This went on for a week.

As the two children walked along, chatting and kicking stones and twigs, Timmy's friend noticed that the same lady was following them every day. Finally, she asked Timmy, “Have you seen that lady following us to school all week? Do you know her?”

“Yeah,” Timmy responded nonchalantly, “I know who she is.”

“Well, who is she?” his little friend insisted.

“Shirley Goodnest, and her daughter, Marcy.”

“But why is she following us?”

“Well,” Timmy explained, “every night when I say my prayers, my Mom has me say the 23rd Psalm, 'cuz she worries about me so much. And in the Psalm, it says, 'Shirley Goodnest and Marcy shall follow me all the days of my life.' So I guess I'll just have to get used to it!”

It's easy to find humor in the way that our children, in all innocence, mispronounce words in the Bible, or mistake their meanings. And, in truth, they can be very funny. On the other hand, we adults don't always do such a good job of understanding our Christian vocabulary, either. Or we skirt around the importance of words by treating them as topics for some kind of biblical trivia quiz.

To illustrate: I came across an internet website called the “Christian Bible Reference Site,” which maintains a table of how many times certain words appear in the Bible. Be warned that this is not as exact an exercise as it sounds. Few of you, I suspect, arrived at church this morning expecting to be told that the word “light” appears in the Bible anywhere from 229 and 272 times.

If you find that phrasing odd, I'll certainly understand. I mean, words either appear in a book or they don't. And the number of times that words appear doesn't normally change from one week to the next. If they did, we might suspect that we'd fallen into a Harry Potter movie. We certainly don't expect to hear that a word appears between 229 and 272 times in the same book.

But the statement is accurate, as far as it goes—and for good reason. Namely: every translation is an interpretation. Let me repeat that: Every translation is an interpretation. A translator must first try to understand just what a word means to those in whose language it originated. Having discerned that, the translator must then find the English word that does the very best job of capturing that meaning.

But Bible scholars don't always agree on what a word originally meant in Hebrew or Greek or Aramaic. And different groups of scholars sometimes choose different words or phrases to translate the same passage. That's why one version of the English-language Bible might use a word like “light” more or less often than another version.

Nor is light the only word on which our several versions of the Bible differ. The word “God,” for example—a word the importance of which I am sure you appreciate—appears 475 fewer times in the New International Version than it did in the old King James Bible.

On the other hand, the word “love”—another staple of biblical theology—appeared only 310 times in the old King James Bible, but is used 538 times in the New Revised Standard Version.

I shall resist the temptation to speculate on what these differences might suggest about either us or our spiritual forebears in 17th Century England. Suffice it to say that the differences are there.

The point here is simple: counting words is meaningless. A far more important task is to distinguish between important and unimportant uses of the same word. Because some uses are so trivial as to be irrelevant, while other uses are key to grasping what it means to be Christian.

A word that may be of central importance in one sentence may be trivial in the next, and vice versa, depending on how the word is used. Consider the word on which this morning's sermon is focused—the word “light.”

In I Samuel, the young man who would become King David is instructed to leave a place early in the morning, a phrase sometimes translated to read, “as soon as it is light.” Now I'm confident that marching at dawn was important to David and his troops; but it's hardly of theological importance to 21st Century Christians.

Another usage appears in II Kings, where a man declares that “it is only a light thing” for God to deliver an enemy into the hands of the Israelites. In other words, for God, conquering a hostile army is a piddling task.

Or again, in Psalm 27, the psalmist uses light as a metaphor for divine protection, singing, “The Lord is my light and my salvation; of whom shall I be afraid?”

On the other hand, the meaning of an entire biblical passage may turn upon the use of a single word. I am confident, for example, that the ancient Hebrew writers had something profound in mind when, in the opening verses of Genesis, they declared that the very first thing that God created was light. After all, life as we know it would not be possible without it.

Later on, the prophet Isaiah employed light as a metaphor for God's loving intervention in Israel's history. Indeed, seven-hundred years before the birth of Jesus, he penned words that now have a central place in our celebration of the season of Advent: “The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light—those who lived in a land of deep darkness, on them light has shined.”

Light was equally important in the life of the early Church, as in Matthew's account of one of the most dramatic moments in scripture, when he described how Jesus was “...transfigured before them, and his face shown like the sun.”

Again, in describing the infant Jesus's dedication in the temple in Jerusalem, Luke quotes a prayer attributed to an old man named Simeon, a prayer that we now call the *nunc dimittis*. If we read carefully, we quickly discern that the prayer is not simply about Jews, but reaches out to encompass us as well. Seeing the infant Jesus, Simeon took the child into his arms and prayed:

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.

Nor can we forget the elegant words with which the author of the Gospel according to John describes the incarnation: “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.”

I ask you to take note of a common characteristic in the syntax of these passages, both Hebrew and Christian: namely, that light is most often defined as something that we observe, or as something that comes to us, or something that happens to us. People saw light, or felt the glow of it, or found their way because of it, or recognized it as a sign of the presence and activity of God.

What, then, are we to make of the unusual wording in this morning's epistle lesson, in which the Apostle Paul challenges the church in Ephesus with the words, “For once you were darkness, [but] now in the Lord you are light.”

Note that Paul does not say that they have seen light, or that they need to go looking for it, or that light has shined upon them. He says, simply and bluntly, you are light.

Does this make sense? Can we average human beings claim, without pretension or conceit, to be light? Was Paul even correct in making such an assertion? I believe that he was—most simply because Jesus said the same thing.

Yes, I realize that in this morning's lesson from John's version of the gospel, Jesus is quoted as saying, “I am the light of the world”—a claim that does seem more credible than to say that we are light.

But in his recording of the Sermon on the Mount, Matthew quotes Jesus as saying precisely what Paul said to the Ephesians: “You are the light of the world.” What's more, he went on to admonish us to shine with such power that other people, seeing our light, will no longer be content to walk in darkness.

How are we to do this? How does a Christian behave so as to be light? What must we do to validate the claim that both Jesus and Paul lay upon us? The answer, I submit, is to seek out the numerous clues that Jesus gives us in the stories of his own conduct.

Luke reports that when Jesus attended the synagogue in his hometown of Nazareth and was handed the scroll of the prophecies of Isaiah and asked to read the text, he chose the passage:

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor.

As he moved about Palestine, he shattered one social barrier after another by refusing to honor every constraint imposed by status, outmoded social custom, or plain, garden variety bigotry. He welcomed and embraced women, touched lepers, and hugged children. People who were blind or crippled or possessed by demonic spirits were comforted and healed. Foreigners and those branded as sinners were welcomed and affirmed. In brief, everyone who, in Jesus' time and society, was powerless, demeaned, or outcast, was drawn into the circle of his love.

And the while, he referred to God as Abba, a title that does not translate as father—the formal term that defines paternal origin—but Daddy, a term at once so intimate that it startles us, even embarrasses us, raising the hair on the backs of our necks.

In brief, he not only spoke of love, he radiated it, offering it to everyone who came near him by being profligate in committing acts of mercy. This is the light that we are called to follow, in company with which we ourselves may—in obedience— become the light that helps to enlighten the world.

We will not all be given the same opportunities, or face the same challenges. Few if any of us are called to scale great barriers, or perform miracles, or commit acts of heroism to prove that we are faithful.

But that doesn't matter. Because every last one of us has opportunity to fulfill the lovely adage credited to St. Francis de Sales, Bishop of Geneva in the early 17th Century: "Bloom where you are planted." That is our calling. It is not our task to save the world. For that, we must depend upon God. But it is our opportunity to shine as Christ to our neighbors in the towns and villages of northeast Ohio, by the doing of which we can make concrete our discipleship to the one whose death and resurrection we will shortly celebrate.

Amen.