

Sermon for Epiphany

St. Christopher's Episcopal Church, Killeen, Texas

January 6, 2019

We are surrounded by miracles in this universe.

The further out into space you look through a telescope, the further back into time you see. In any direction you look, if you look out to 13.8 billion light years, you are seeing the light from events that happened 13.8 billion years ago. The universe is a cosmic time machine.

I didn't pick that 13.8 billion number by accident. Scientists have been able to bring into focus variations in the earliest light it's possible to see following the creation of the universe 13.8 billion years ago. That is the moment when the primordial fireball that was the universe finally expanded to the point where there was enough empty space for light to fly through.

In other words, if you look far enough in any direction in space you will see a wall of the densest flame imaginable, and that wall of flame is the light of creation itself. Behind the wall of flame lie the secrets of creation that scientists today pursue with religious fervor, including the moment a million billionth of a second after the instant of creation, when the laws of physics themselves cease to apply and we would find ourselves in another realm entirely. It reminds me of the phrase from the Hymnal that places God "in light inaccessible, hid from our eyes." It was no mistake that the first words of God in creation were, "Let there be light."

But that's even not the most amazing thing. The most amazing thing is that the light from the wall of primordial flame which has traveled for 13.8 billion years to reach us, has not itself experienced the passage of a single instant of time. Einstein tells us that time slows down as things move faster until, at the speed of light, time ceases to pass entirely. That means that, for the light we're seeing from 13.8 billion years ago, not a single tick of the clock has occurred. For light such as that – and it floods all of space – the universe is a single thing and nothing within it is separated by time at all. This light is still on the lips of God speaking the words, "Let there be light."

We're *that* close to God.

Is it any wonder, then, that Epiphany is preoccupied with light as the primary manifestation of God? The light of the Magi's star, the light surrounding the dove descending in glory from heaven at Jesus' baptism, the light represented by Jesus who was the word that was with God in the beginning and is the true light that is always coming into the world, the light of God that shines in the darkness which the darkness has such a hard time comprehending – all these lights shine with the light of creation itself, which has aged not a single tick of God's clock.

No wonder. If light is about the timeless and instantaneous connection of every point in space, then darkness is about the separation of things and people from each other. For light there is no separation at all, but for darkness, everything is separate. We stand alone in the dark, cut off from one another's light.

Separation can be good and bad, of course. Separation can mean isolation and loneliness; help too distant and consequent despair; anger at the inability to control that which lies too far beyond our grasp; depression because we cannot get that firm grasp on things; despair at the ultimate separation of death. Newborns isolated from physical human contact fail to flourish. A lot of bad things are associated with separation and darkness.

At the same time, separation makes life possible by giving us the space and time we need to be who we are. In the post-Victorian society of Britain, Virginia Woolf referred to good separation as “a room of one’s own,” where a woman is able to discover the thoughts of her own heart and learn about her identity. Without separation, we cease to be individuals and, in one of the last century’s greatest fears, we become Marx’s mere masses. Without some separation we would never know the visceral reward of cooperation, or the meaning of the words “to care,” or the joy of redemption.

So, our lives in semi-darkness come as an open-ended challenge. We need to be separate in order to be the individuals that we are, yet not so distant that our separation leads to separation from God’s light yielding some form of death. It’s a struggle to get this balance right, and we find ourselves moving back and forth, sometimes too close to others, sometimes too distant. We close in on our children with discipline...we back away and give them space. Which is right, and when? Lots of people have tried to write rulebooks for this dance, but few have anything real to say.

What, then, does the light of Epiphany bring to a world defined by separation? What does it mean to be a separate individual in a world where the timeless light of creation from the lips of God is present everywhere and everywhen?

On the one hand, that light seems incredibly weak. All light is heat – that’s why the radiant energy of the sun makes the earth warm. Well, the light from creation 13.8 billion years ago is only three degrees above absolute zero. It doesn’t warm anything. It used to be responsible only for snow on a TV screen in the days before cable when television stations actually signed off at night. The light of creation doesn’t *do* anything.

God himself can certainly seem that way. Stalin famously asked Roosevelt, “How many divisions has the Pope got?” Pilate killed God with the snap of his fingers. When you and I are feeling the most down and isolated, things like love and grace and hope seem wispy and insubstantial indeed compared to the dark force of our gloom. If God is as weak and insubstantial as light cooled down to three degrees above absolute zero, what’s he good for?

And yet in the light that connects everywhere and everywhen timelessly there is an appeal not to the body that craves physical warmth like that of the sun, but rather to the heart and mind and soul and strength. The idea that the very light that flew out from the mouth of God in creation is falling on us not a millisecond later is deeply stirring. It reminds me that we are eternally present at the very moment that God spoke the words that created us. That fills me with a profound desire simply to *be*. It inspires with the knowledge that what truly matters about us is never separated by darkness from help or love or power or hope, but is always, everywhere and instantly present to our source of being.

In being touched by such light spoken forth fresh from the mouth of God, we see things differently. We may have things to do in the world of empty spaces and darkness, miles to go and promises to keep, but there is *nothing to discover out there in the dark that we do not already have*. In fact, our salvation is not dependent on getting something from anything or anybody in the world of separate things. Our salvation is dependent on ourselves alone insofar as we draw closer and closer to the light of God, eternally present, that spoke us into being.

And we *are* part of one another as well.

Space is not just filled with creation's three-degree cold background light. Space is filled with the light of stars. The stars are instantly and timelessly present to one another as light flashes between them without the passage of time. But stars are also hot, able to warm worlds around them into life. When Isaiah says, "Arise, shine for your light has come," he means for you and me not only to draw our inspiration from the quiet light of God but also to burn brightly like stars so that we, too, can make life possible in the planetary orbits around us. When we shine like the stars spread throughout space, singing to one another with their own glorious light, then other things come to life, connected to us by the timeless passage of the light we ourselves have generated.

So, don't wait for objects in the dark to come and tell you who you are and what you are to be. Rather, "Arise, shine, for *your* light has come!" Indeed, it has never been apart from you.

For wherever you are in the darkness, however separated from others you may think you are, *you are the light of God*. Don't wait for the light to dawn on you. You will wait forever. *Be* the light of God. The light of Epiphany is already and always nothing other than you.

The Rev. David Hoster