

The Journey from Darkness to Light:

An Epiphany Sermon

Joel 2:12-13; 28-29; Isaiah 60:1-6

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In 1994, I spent a number of months living in Northern Ireland, volunteering at a community centre whose mission was to bring Protestant and Catholic youth together in a peacebuilding effort during a time of political and religious unrest. These years were known as “The Troubles.” My home base was Belfast, but I took many trips around the north to tour the sites. One weekend, I joined a few new friends for a hike on the north west coast, close to Donegal. It was a remote and rugged spot. We hiked steeply upwards for a few hours and as we climbed, the fog got thicker. We could barely see a meter or two in front of us. It was quite disorienting. We reached the pinnacle, but couldn’t gauge how high we’d come, so we sat and rested. Gradually, the fog dissipated and our perspective shifted dramatically. We were standing at the top of a cliff looking way down at the sea and rocks below us. The closeness of the dark fog gave way to an expansive, endless view.

This experience of obscured vision becoming clear came to mind when I considered our passage from Isaiah this week— a passage we often read at Epiphany. Isaiah says:

Arise, shine, for your light has come,
and the glory of the LORD has risen upon you.

²For darkness shall cover the earth
and thick darkness the peoples,
but the LORD will arise upon you,
and his glory will appear over you (60:1-2).

Epiphany is about things coming to light. It is about God’s glory becoming manifest in the world through the person of Jesus Christ. But there is another important part to this. Not only does God become manifest. We are witness to this revelation. In other words, the event of God’s manifestation takes place and we are there to experience it. In the Eastern Christian tradition, Jesus’ baptism is celebrated on Epiphany. In the Western Christian tradition, Epiphany celebrates the

visit of the three Magi who follow a light in the darkness in the form of a star which leads them to the Christ child.

We don't know a lot about these three visitors, except that they come from "the East." The term "Magi" is related to our English word "magic" and probably refers to a priestly class of Persian astrologers most likely associated with the religion of Zoroastrianism. They are also identified as "wise men" and "kings", which is significant given that the Gospel of Matthew stresses that these "three kings" are the first to recognize Jesus as the "king" of the Jews. It is also significant that these visitors are Gentiles, not Jews. Already as a newborn, Jesus is extending God's welcome beyond certain exclusive boundaries of belonging.

As we know, the Magi brought the infant Jesus treasured gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. I collect essential oils and I was curious about the smell of frankincense and myrrh, so I ordered some and brought them with me, if you'd like to smell them after the service.

Images of darkness and light appear throughout the scriptures and carry a few different meanings. For example, in the Psalms, God's Word is called "a lamp to our feet," guiding us on the right path (119:105). I remember when I worked as a staff person at Silver Lake Mennonite Camp, I would try to navigate the paths at night without a flashlight. One of the other counsellors, John Brubacher, now a biology professor, taught me that our peripheral vision works better at night, so I could sense the edges of the familiar paths without really being able to see clearly. I recommend trying that out if you come to the TUMC retreat this June. Maybe I can lead a night hike for those who are interested.

During the time of creation, God commands that there be light and deems it "good." Sin, on the other hand, is often associated with darkness and blindness. I sometimes think of sin as a smudging of one's glasses. The more we stray from God's will and do harm to ourselves and others, the more our vision becomes cloudy. Things like cynicism and suspicion cause us to look at the world through dirty glasses and keep us from clearly seeing God's light in others.

When we repent, it is like cleaning our glasses. Our passages from Joel talk about repentance as a rending of the heart, which, for the ancients was not so much the seat of emotion, but the seat of the will. It seems very personal to talk about the

heart and the will, but, as modern readers, we are too often tempted to read scripture individualistically. Joel is speaking about the necessary repentance of God's people. That the heart of God's people must become realigned with God's will. When the people realign their hearts with God, God responds by pouring out God's spirit and grants gifts of dreams and visions. Even slaves are granted these gifts, according to the book of Joel!

We don't know very much about the author Joel or if there was even only one author. Some scholars place the date of the book as written anywhere from the 9th century to the 4th century BCE. Even the references to "foreign nations" are too vague to pinpoint where in the biblical story this book fits. Joel is listed as one of the Twelve Prophets of the Old Testament, also known as the Twelve "Minor" Prophets. Us older Reimer siblings used to make fun of our youngest brother Micah for being named after one of these mere "minor" prophets. (No offense to our own Joel Klassen.)

We find Joel most often cited during Advent and Lent, both seasons of repentance. Joel takes us on a journey from repentance to forgiveness; from darkness to light. When my Dad was in his final days, he talked about darkness and light a lot. For those of you who don't know my family, my Dad was a theologian, but he didn't focus very much on the afterlife. In fact, I don't think he wrote about it at all. He was more concerned about history and about how we live our lives and how we think about God. But, when faced with his own mortality, he did say that he hoped that heaven would be Enlightenment. Clear vision and full understanding. 1 Corinthians 13 says it well: "For now I see through a glass darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known" (12). Our family thought a fitting epitaph for Dad's gravestone would be "Now I See" to reflect this coming to light he associated with death.

In addition to this very new role as one of your pastors, I am continuing my work as a facilitator, leading trainings on conflict resolution and trauma-informed practices in the workplace. My most recent client was Vision Loss Canada. It was an online workshop over Zoom and it was a new challenge for me to figure out how to accommodate participants with vision loss who couldn't see my PowerPoint slides. I was coached by one of the managers ahead of time who suggested that I read everything out loud instead of expecting that people would

read the text themselves. What I came to realize is that I am deeply and unconsciously ocularcentric. In other words, I prioritize vision as the most important sense. I found myself stumbling over my word choices, every once in a while, in an attempt to avoid using vision metaphors. For example we often say “I see” when we understand something. We say, “look here,” when we want someone else to understand us. Ancient Greeks like Plato and Aristotle argued that sight is the superior sense because of its ability to recognize beauty. The Bible is full of vision language and vision is usually associated with what is good. Jesus himself is called “The Light of the World” in the Gospel of John and the Magi find this holy light through the light of a star.

This last fall, I taught an online course for Canadian Mennonite University on Disability Theology, so I got to thinking about our church spaces and services and how folks with disabilities experience worship. In preparation for one of my classes, I came across an “eye-opening”, NO, interesting book written by a Finnish architect named Juhani Pallasmaa called *The Eyes of the Skin: Architecture and the Senses*. He argues that the eye has contributed to the separation of the self from the world - that I am here, and I am looking at a world that is seemingly out there, whereas the other senses unite us with the world. As an architect, his mission is to create spaces that engage all of the senses, not just sight. He uses the example of his childhood home and how his memory of this home is based on the smell of the house, not the sight of the house. The smell is what makes it home for him. I’m sure we can all draw on memories of the way different houses have smelled to us.

As an aside, I have a very keen sense of smell for better or for worse, hence my love of essential oils. Smell is my superpower sense. And my mom once told me about St. Christina the Astonishing, who hated the smell of sin on people. The legend goes that when she died, her spirit rose into the rafters of the church so that she didn’t have to smell the congregation.

Back to Pallasmaa’s book on architecture. He has an evocative ability to describe the way he experiences space through the whole body. He says:

"I confront the city with my body; my legs measure the length of the arcade and the width of the square...my body weight meets the mass of the cathedral door, and my hand grasps the door pull as I enter the dark void behind. I experience myself in the city, and the city exists through my embodied experience." From this quote,

you can get a sense of what he means when he talks about how the senses unite us with the world, not separate us from it, as sight can sometimes do.

Pallasmaa does talk about sight as a part of his bodily experience of the world, but he doesn't place it at the top of the sensory hierarchy. I used to be so jealous of my Catholic and Anglican high church friends growing up because their experience of worship was so much more sensuous than my own Mennonite experience. There were so many things to see and smell and taste (the eucharist happening far more frequently in those traditions, for example). In the Mennonite tradition, our worship isn't quite as embodied, although I do think that Mennonite worship often prioritizes the ear and hearing the word and music more than sight. As we think about how our senses encounter worship, we can take it as a holy challenge for us to continue to seek understanding when it comes to how disabled bodies experience worship. And I welcome your feedback and creative ideas about how we can improve on this front.

In conclusion, I encourage you to think of the revelation of Epiphany as a full body experience: an incarnational manifestation of God in the body of a human being. May you find blessing in the beauty made known to us through sight, through the evocative smells of things like frankincense and myrrh, through the healing touch of a friend, through the taste of a delicious meal, and in the sound of a favourite song. In the words of the Psalmist, glory be to the God who knits us together in our mother's womb. The God we praise because we are fearfully and wonderfully made (139). Amen.