

Willingness is the Key -- Epiphany 6C

“And the city has no need of sun or moon to shine on it, for its light is the Glory of God.” This image we just heard reiterated: “And there will be no more night; they need no light of lamp or sun, for the Lord God will be their light forever and ever.” This image is a frequent one in holy scripture. It is a central, foundational metaphor when people try to talk about what it is God means, what it is they want from God, what kind of power it is they are hoping to align themselves with in prayer and worship, whose side they say they’re on.

But it’s a much iffier analogy for us than it was for the folks who sang these songs and told these stories, who passed them along and wrote them down. We still say the psalms together and read the scriptures, but relating to them is not always easy. “In him there is no darkness at all, the night and the day are both alike, the lamb is the light of the city of God, shine in my heart, Lord Jesus,” is a beautiful prayer, but nowhere near as powerful as it was even 100 years ago, much less 2000 or more, when the ideas took shape.

Why? How many times in our lives do we really experience darkness so as to be afraid of it? Certainly in childhood, when things go bump in the night, we all (some more than others) cry out for the comfort of light and company. Or when we’re teenagers and we stay out a little too late or walk through unfamiliar streets or woods, we had that sense of reeeeeeally wanting to get back safe and sound to hearth and home. Maybe out in the country, if we stray from the campfire or the cabin, down by the river or on a moonless nighttime beach, we get that adrenalin rush that experts describe as “fight or flight,” but most of us experience as “get me the heck out of here!”

But these experiences are rare in our culture. Ever since Edison’s light bulb, we’ve been moving further and further away from the dread of darkness upon which all these biblical references to God as light are based. The fear is deep within our psyche, and readily

available to cinematographers, but also easily dispelled in developed countries – when the lights come up. It's just not a problem for most of us, so we don't need God to solve it.

I don't know if this is so for everyone, but whenever I take an airplane ride at night, I always have a vague sense of wastefulness, even embarrassment, if not sin(!) looking down at the millions and millions of lights always on, eliminating the darkness, eliminating the night, doing God's job. I find myself yearning for some good darkness, to see more stars, get a break from civilization and dance with the phosphorescent plankton for a change. Darkness is a rare and valuable commodity in these parts, in this day and age.

So what kind of imagery can work on us? What is it we don't have that we really need, that only God's grace can provide? How can we feel God's face is shining upon us, feel we are standing on the banks of 'a river whose streams make glad the city of God?' The Bible is cleverer than we think. They saw us coming along, they knew we would find lots of ways around the need for God, including having virtually the whole country lit up around the clock so that in us there is no darkness at all.

In the large city hospital where I did my chaplaincy training, I spent a good deal of time working with addicts in disease education, Bible study, and individual counseling sessions. I once asked the psychiatrist who headed the department of mental health what the factors are that make up effective mental health treatment. "It's a three-legged stool," he responded, "in reverse order, the legs are talk therapy, psychopharmacology, and willingness." In other words, unless someone has a good attitude, the meds won't necessarily work (in fact the meds probably won't even get taken); and without a positive spirit and better chemistry, all the talk in the world won't help.

Perhaps this is a useful model for us to use when talking about God. If we're not having, nor likely anytime soon to have a problem with

darkness, per se, we can surely admit that the barrage of images and expectations and temptations clamoring for our attention have worked to make us fragile, frustrated and fickle when it comes to our lives of faith. Like the old cartoon, Fractured Fairy Tales, we bend the stories of God's grace and power until they fit our view of the world, and we count on faith for less and less.

The three-legged stool is something we can still understand; nobody can sit on a two-legged stool. In the Anglican tradition, whence Episcopalians spring, the three legs are scripture, tradition and reason. We could say scripture is the talk therapy, the received wisdom. Tradition is the chemistry that gets us all on the same page. And reason we might call the willingness – what gets us in the door in the first place. That is, we are hungry for faith in community, so we come here; we worship together and take our medicine to put us in the mood, and then the word of God can work on us, the story of Jesus can change us. A little too complicated...

Or we might say that God is the talk therapy (the scripture), and Jesus is the brain chemical for an emotionally ill world (now our traditional medicine, aka Holy Communion). So what is the willingness, that third crucial leg -- the one we stuffy, intellectual, analytical Episcopalians call 'reason,' but really is as much or more of a mystery than any of them – willingness?

Jesus is also cleverer than we think. This mystery is the gift he promises will always be here to remind us of him. It is the one thing we will surely never figure out. And just in case we ever do think we have figured it out, there's an ejector seat mechanism in our car. Because denying this mystery, says Jesus, is the only sin that's unforgivable. If you say there's no such thing as willingness, you're hopeless!

So what is it, this undeniable, third element, this willingness/reason/openness of heart that can serve as an effective treatment for us ultra-modern folks who are unimpressed by light

images, water walking, altered states mythical loaves and fishes; people like us who know that God is not hanging out up in space somewhere, because we have been up there and checked? John's Gospel this morning called this thing the Holy Spirit, the Advocate. And lest we think it a minor deal, the word John actually used appears more than 100 times throughout the New Testament.

When translated, the word "Paraclete" comes out lots of ways: Counselor, Helper, Comforter, Advocate, Guide, Spirit of Truth et cetera. Yes, this variety helps us know the wideness of God's goodness and mercy, but all these choices dilute our awareness of the Paraclete as a vital part of our spiritual life, as crucial to us as the third leg is to a stool. 100 appearances, it has got to be important. But we don't hear the word Paraclete much outside academia. The seminary I went to was part of a big university, so our Divinity School intramural soccer team was called the Paracletes. You had to be there...

Literally, it means "One who is Called Alongside," from the Greek. One who is called alongside to help us in present times of trouble. One who comes alongside to help us change the only thing we can change: that is ourselves. There is so much we cannot change in this world. We can't change somebody else, can't change institutions, can't change other countries or even our own government much, it often seems. We can't change City Hall, or even our own kids; can't change the weather or the outcome of an illness or a ball game. But if we call upon this Spirit, if we pray for the willingness, and just for a moment abandon the need to understand or substantiate or control things, we can indeed change ourselves.

That's what the Paraclete does, the Spirit as it is known, the Holy Ghost Power. If you call upon it, it will come to change you and make you willing. There are many lesser things we can't change, but the greatest gift is to change oneself. This power enables us to be who we want to be even when we can't do what we want to do.

Jesus said, "Peace I leave with you; my peace I bring to you." This peace which passes all understanding comes from being who we want to be. A great woman once said, "When love and good humor merge, the result is peace." Surely that is what Jesus wants for us. And the image we must never, can never abandon or escape is that of willingness, the Spirit, the Holy Ghost Power. It is the lasting part of God's bargain with humankind. It is the power that lets us open our hearts when we see a good thing and go for it.

Willingness. It's an image that works for us ultramodern types, and it can make these scriptures and psalms as relevant to us as they ever were, no matter how much we learn about the cosmos, no matter how thoroughly we overlight our civilized world. The Spirit is to us as Jesus was to the Disciples, as God has always been in the minds and hearts of the faithful, "...a very present help in trouble..." so that "...we will not fear, though the earth be moved, and though the mountains be cast into the depths of the sea, though its waters rage and foam, and the mountains tremble at its tumult..." For, once we get in the habit of praying for willingness, we can never again doubt or deny that the Lord of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our stronghold.