

THE LORD IS MY LIGHT

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Camrose United Church
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John 8:12-20 – I am the light of the world

Matthew 5:13-16 – You are the light of the world

[To the choir] Thank you. That kind of music sends shivers up my spine. “Whom shall I fear?” That’s a marvellous message. Last year Helen Reed [our Youth Minister] was on vacation and visited St. Paul’s Cathedral in London. That’s where the original painting that is the basis of this stained glass window [in our chancel] hangs, a painting done in the 19th century by Holman Hunt. Helen brought back as a gift for our church a copy of the painting together with a write-up about the painting’s symbolism. I thought it would be nice to have the painting framed and hung somewhere in the church, and to use it as the basis for a sermon to reflect on that marvellous window in our chancel. The write-up also explains some of the painting’s history. Hunt actually painted it twice, and there is another artist who painted much the same thing, too. One of Hunt’s paintings was sold on the condition that it be used as a tool for evangelism, and the painting was actually toured and seen by people throughout the world. It has moved people to open the doors of their hearts to the light of Christ. So it’s really quite a marvellous story.

The painting is entitled “The Light of the World.” In our stained glass window the title has been expanded to “I am the Light of the World,” making it a quotation of Jesus from a couple of different places in John’s gospel. It’s a painting in the style of a time when there was much detailed symbolism for the explicit intention of teaching, and so there’s much that can be learned just by looking at the painting and seeing it closely. It portrays much about who Christ is. Notice his clothing first of all. Underneath, he has actually a very simple, plain, peasant robe; but over top of that is laid a very regal, royal, priestly kind of robe. And so the painting portrays Jesus as a very common, ordinary human being who in his resurrection life wears the robe of the king. The crown is also a royal symbol of the king, but he doesn’t have just the crown. The crown of thorns, also, is on his head. One can’t see it very well in the picture, but it’s a little clearer in the stained glass where we can see the thorny kind of stuff with the crown laid in front. And if we look really closely at the hands we can see the nail marks in his hand that is holding the lantern. So here we have a portrayal of the passion--the suffering of Christ who died for us--painted right into there with the life of the risen Lord portrayed as well.

The door itself is overgrown with thorns in the midst of a forest, and it has no latch on it-- at least not on the outside--pointing out that the door can’t be opened from the outside. Jesus doesn’t force his way into our hearts. He only waits for the door to be opened from the inside. He’s not standing facing the door like one usually would when knocking; he’s turned away. The commentator says that the words “Behold, I stand at the door and knock” really mean “I have been knocking and I’ve been doing that for a long time.” There’s a sense that Jesus is almost ready to walk away, that he doesn’t wait

forever, that there is an opportunity to be grasped. There are moments in life when we can hear his knock at the door and see the light that is offered. Those are some of the symbolic points that are noted in the write-up accompanying the print that Helen brought back with her.

I thought I would take that scripture passage, “I am the Light of the World,” and consider what it means in relation to this particular painting. The passage that Paul [Harland] read has Jesus saying “I am the light of the world,” and people like the Pharisees challenging him on the question of authority. “Hey, this guy is bearing testimony to himself.” Normally, two objective witnesses are needed to bear testimony in order to make something certain. But here is this Jesus; he’s just claiming this for himself. How can we believe that? He says he’s the light of the world. So what? That passage is about testimony or authority--how do we know for sure that this person who claims to be the light of the world really is the light of the world?--and that connects us to one of the central questions in our whole Christian faith. In a sense, that question is pictured in the painting, in that window, with the door closed and Jesus standing there holding the lantern. And there’s the light shining outside the door. But how does the person inside know that it is Jesus who is knocking? If you lived in a little place like that in the middle of the forest with no windows, and if it were dark and somebody came knocking in the middle of the night, would you open the door right away? It’s a frightening scene really; the darkness and the thorns make it difficult for us to open our hearts to Jesus. It’s a frightening thing also because we have often lived in the darkness and in some respects have lost our way. Or some part of us deep down inside has been wounded and broken and has shut down.

While opening up is an opportunity for healing, it is also painful. So we don’t take lightly what it means to open the door or to recognize the light. But Jesus replies in a way that to me is one of the most important parts of the gospel message. He doesn’t say “Ok, here’s the proof, here are my credentials, here are my certificates, here’s my whole band of witnesses who will prove this to you.” What he says amounts to saying those who have eyes to see from their hearts recognize the light. And that’s how it was. There were people who recognized the light. He’s not just holding a lantern. The lantern is not the only light in the picture. There’s also the halo--that glow of light to which reference is made many times in the Bible. Jesus is someone who is just shining presence, as was Moses when he came down off the mountain. That is a symbol of sacred presence throughout the Bible--the light that emanates from a person, that shining, that ethereal light, a symbol of the presence of the divine. And there are no attending proofs or certificates or analytical certainties. That’s something that we either recognize or we don’t. And when we do it’s because that light is in us, too.

Years ago when I was doing some healing after the end of my first marriage, I was at the Naramata Centre in a personal growth lab. This was a very intensive process of working with some other people and looking deeply into ourselves to see what needed healing. The process also helped us to find some of the strengths within ourselves, and to find what we needed to move on through our personal crises. The leaders were Ivan and Nina Cummings who are two of the most wise and skilful people in that field that I’ve ever met. One day I was talking with Nina. There was some real strength in her that had been so moving as I watched the way she worked with people. We were talking casually

over coffee, and I told her how much I admired the strength that I saw in her. She is a tiny person, with a beautiful smile and a very gentle graciousness, and she looked back up at me and said something like “The only way you can recognize that in me is because it is in you, too.” To hear those words in a setting like that was one of the most affirming and profoundly helpful things for me in my own growth. I’ve always remembered that.

In terms of the spiritual strengths and the power in another person, we can recognize that in another person only because it is in our self. It may be that we’re not aware of it, that we can’t access it, but the fact that we recognize it in others helps us to develop it within ourselves. I see that throughout Jesus’ ministry when people acknowledged what they saw in him, as for example when Peter said “You’re the Messiah.” Jesus didn’t say “You got it right finally; I’m the Messiah; you’re not, but I am.” He said not to tell anybody, because people would not understand. Jesus was trying to tell people that the Messiah is in all of us, the Saviour is in all of us; that sacred presence, that sacred power that transforms life, is in all of us. And he came to tell people to live that presence in a way more profoundly and more radiantly than ever before so that people would see it so clearly. But he was living it like a mirror. He said he wanted people to see this in themselves.

Toward the end of the same book--John’s gospel--Jesus told the disciples before he left them that they had seen amazing things that he had done. He added that after he was gone they were going to do far more powerful things than he had ever done. He said that to his disciples because his purpose in his ministry was to show people the light of the world, the divine light that was in them. And so, to be complete, the phrase “I am the Light of the World” from John’s gospel needs to be laid alongside Jesus’ teachings in Matthew that say “You’re the light of the world, you’re the salt of the earth, you’re the one through whom God seeks to be present in the world.” And when you open the doors of your hearts to let in the light of the world--the one whom God has sent--you become an ongoing part of this body of Christ who is the light of the world. Even though Jesus is gone from this earth, the body of Christ lives on. And that’s us, that’s us the church. We are the light of the world.

And so when we look at that window in our chancel, and see that light shining and waiting for those who will recognize it and open the door and let their hearts enter in, what we are seeing is a picture of who we are as a church. We are the ones who recognize the light because it’s in us. We are the ones who accept that wonderful and challenging mission from God to be the light of the world for this whole beautiful world of ours in many different ways, in thousands of different ways. It is one light that shines in every way throughout the world.

Transcribed by Sue and By Reesor