

The Light of Our Life

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Genesis 1:3-5 - Let there be light
Psalm 119:105 - A light to my path
Isaiah 9:2 - The people who walked in darkness
Isaiah 42:6 - Light to the nations
Matthew 4:16 - Light has dawned
Matthew 5:14-16 - You are the light of the world
Luke 2:30-32 - A light for revelation
John 1:6-9 - The true light, which enlightens everyone
Revelation 21:23 - The glory of God is its light

Some of you know that poetry has always been important to me. This month I'm doing something that I have wanted to do for a long time--using a different poem as the centre of the message each week. I'm using not only my favourite poems; what makes this even more special is that I'm using poems that people have shared with me. Last week, as you know, Hazel Naslund joined me in reading a poem, "Go Down Death," that she had shared with me about a year ago. She also told me a bit of what it meant to her, and so there an element of testimony in sharing our faith with each other.

The poem that I want to share with you today was written by a friend of mine in the North Vancouver congregation where I served before coming here. His name is Dermott McInnes, a retired United Church minister. He was well into his nineties at the time, and must be approaching the age of one hundred years by now. Most of his career was spent as a hospital chaplain, but in his old age he became a poet and a photographer. Wherever he and his wife travelled he took pictures, many of them having deep symbolic value. He then wrote poems which had such beautiful flow. Each would begin by just appreciating the beauty or the interest of the photograph, and then would move into the feeling that it held for him. Finally, the poem would move another step into a spiritual depth.

He makes these into cards and has discovered that he can put his photographs on the covers of greeting cards, put his poems on the insides, and send them to his friends and family. For years he has created one of these cards at Christmas, one at Easter, one at Thanksgiving, and sometimes one in the summer. And so I have a marvellous collection. I was one of many people over the years who encouraged him to collect the cards, make copies, and publish them. He did that this past year, and I have his collection here called *The Spirit Within* which he sold to friends in his congregation and to his family as a fund raiser for the Beads of Hope campaign, raising over \$2,000.00. So it's a real treasure of mine.

This particular poem I want to share with you today is entitled "Three Wonders." It's based on a picture from his summer place at Point Roberts which is right down by the ocean, by the shore. At one place on the point of land there is a navigational beacon, and his photograph is a picture of the beacon at a particular time of the day and season when

one can actually see the moon in the sky in broad daylight. I'll read his description: "On the evening of the summer solstice at Lighthouse Park on Point Roberts I was amazed to see three lights shining together--the light of the setting sun, the light of the rising moon, and the revolving lamp of the Point Roberts marine light, three wonders indeed."

Poems are usually best read at least twice, so I'm going to read this now, share some thoughts about it with you, and then read it again at the end.

Three Wonders

Dermott McInnes

On solstice day the year's longest sun
vanishes beyond Vancouver Island
the gently shining moon nearing its full
spreads a glow on Georgia Strait
the ever twinkling Point Roberts Light
gives sure direction to the night-time mariners
three lights three wonders
the unfailing source
the enchanting reflection
the human ingenuity lighting the dark places

Over the timeless ages the living Spirit
fashions the incredible universe
the secrets of forest flower and fauna
reflect the marvels of creation
the talents of earth's people
safeguard the gifts so lavishly received
three lights three wonders
the unfailing Source
the magnificent reflection
the human concern protecting the fragile environment

In the passing of time the loving Spirit
forms the human family
whose graces strengths and wisdom
reflect the capacity for rich full life
the compassion of the people
heals renews and gives great hope
three lights three wonders
the unfailing Source
the amazing reflection
the human commitment seeking truth peace and love
for all the world

This poem is particularly focussed because it's centred around one very powerful image--that of light--and seeing light, seeing the sacred light, in three different ways. In a

sense all of Dermott's poems have some form of Trinitarian variation to them--three ways of experiencing sacred presence in our world. Part of the reason it is so powerful is that light itself is part of the language of our faith. It's a language that already has breadth and depth of meaning for us, and so Dermott takes something that already has so much power and then uses it to see in a fresh new way the life and world around us. And so, in thinking about a scripture reading to go with that, I ended up choosing this selection of readings that Doreen [Walline] just shared with you because there are so many different ways in which light is used throughout the scriptures. I'll flip through them quickly again. All of these phrases are familiar to us and part of the memory of every one of us: "Let there be light," "a light to my path," "people who walked in darkness," "a light to the nations," "light has dawned," "you are the light of the world," "a light for revelation," "the true light which enlightens everyone," "the glory of God is its light."

That is a selection from what Northrop Frye called the "Great Code." The Bible, our scriptural tradition, contains language and imagery and symbolism which we have learned by hearing those words and hearing them again, by talking and praying and singing them, and by hearing the Word proclaimed in those words throughout the years. In this way our faith is contained in our hearts, held in our hearts. And in the form of that language and imagery the stories and the pictures are part of our faith tradition. It's no accident that the Bible is foundational to our faith. The Jewish and Christian traditions are traditions of the Word, of the Book. There is a Book, and there's a precisely conveyed, copied, and translated set of stories and images with which we have become familiar all through the years. And those very words and phrases have taken on that increasing depth of power for us, throughout the centuries and throughout the years of our own lives. So these symbols are rooted in that tradition of language.

This is in a sense a poetic view of tradition and scripture, looking at it in terms of the images that hold and convey that faith, and in which we can express the faith. We use that language and that imagery and those pictures and those stories in our prayers and in our songs and in our attempts to express our faith and to describe our faith experience. It therefore becomes a code--a language of our faith, and knowing Christianity, being Christian. Part of that is simply learning the language and imagery of our faith.

So as a preacher, I'm always very aware that my job is a kind of straddling. It's a matter both of being rooted in that tradition and heritage of language, and of looking at our lives and our world today; and to be able to do both of those at the same time and to connect them. It's a matter of using that language and imagery that shapes our perception of life as a way of seeing life today, whether it's the innermost experience of our heart and soul, or our interactions with each other in family and friendships and faith community of the church, or whether it's the social and political and economic issues of our world. It's the ability to use that language of imagery and story as a lens through which to look at our world today, for in that way it takes on meaning and color and shape and depth and significance, because what we're really doing is learning from our tradition how to look at our lives, how to look at the world, and see the sacred.

Dermott so brilliantly describes the three different ways in which we see the sacred. In the first place we see it like the sun which is the source itself. The sun is a source of light, and so there's the sacred source which we recognize and discern in life directly.

Second, there's the moon which has no light of its own but reflects the light, and the light shines on the water and reflects again off the water just like in the daylight the sunlight shines and reflects off all the beautiful things that we see in the world. So everything in creation is a reflection of the Creator. And thirdly, there is the human heart in which is planted the sacred; how we live our lives--the love, the caring, the courage, how we live through the suffering and the pain of life, how we live through the darkness and the light, how we reach out to one another like that lighthouse shining as a beacon to keep the ships safe. It is those three lights, the three wonders, using that ancient imagery of light to look at life in a fresh and creative way that Dermott always has, that enables us in a new way to see so that if we walk out of here having heard that poem we can look at our lives--whether it's looking at our own hearts, or looking at all that is in creation, or sensing the sacred presence directly--and see God in every turn and every direction of our lives in a new and fresh way.

Transcribed by Sue and By Reesor