

Malcolm Clemens Young  
Grace Cathedral, San Francisco, CA 2A35  
Christmas Day (Xmas Day III) 11:00 a.m. Online Eucharist  
12)  
Friday 25 December 2020 (Recording 23 December 2020)

Isaiah 52:7-10  
Psalm 98  
Hebrews 1:1-4, (5-  
John 1:1-14

### **Under Ideal Conditions**

"The Light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it" (Jn. 1).

These words summarize the entire Gospel of John and perhaps even what it means to have faith. What is this light shining in the darkness?

Al Zolynas writes about the experience of light and darkness in his poem "Under Ideal Conditions. "Under Ideal Conditions / say in the flattest part of North Dakota / on a starless moonless night / no breath of wind // a man could light a candle / then walk away / every now and then / he could turn and see the candle burning // seventeen miles later / provided conditions remained ideal / he could still see the flame /"

"somewhere between the seventeenth and eighteenth mile / he would lose the light // if he were walking backwards he would know the exact moment when he lost the flame // he could step forward and find it again / back and forth / dark to light light to dark // what's the place where the light disappears? / where the light reappears? / don't tell me about photons / and eyeballs / reflection and refraction / don't tell me about one hundred and eighty-six thousand / miles per second and the theory of relativity // all I know is that place / where the light appears and disappears // that's the place where we live"<sup>1</sup>

In a recent sermon Stephanie Paulsell describes a painting from 1480 by Sandro Boticelli (1445-1510) called "Augustine in his Study."<sup>2</sup> She imagines Augustine (354-430) in it trying to figure out how to begin his *Confessions* perhaps the greatest autobiography of all time.<sup>3</sup> In the end, Augustine decides to start by paraphrasing scripture, Psalm 48. "Great art thou O Lord, and greatly to be praised..."<sup>4</sup> A few sentences later he writes about human sin and pride, but also about the pleasure we were made to experience when we praise God.

She asks where do we begin the story of our life? Do we begin with our grandparents, how our parents met, with a description of the world we were born into? She goes on to ask about the beginnings of this Pandemic. Does this story begin with the defunding of public health initiatives, or patient zero, or the first news reports a year ago, or when London Breed instituted the Stay at Home order in March and the store shelves and

streets were empty, or when we lost someone we love? Where did this season of darkness begin?

Stories about beginnings matter. The Gospel of Mark does not even have the Christmas story in it. It starts with words from Isaiah, with John the Baptist and the deepest human longing for justice. The Gospel of Matthew begins in a lengthy genealogy, a jealous king, magi from the East and the prophecies of holy scripture. The Gospel of Luke tells the story of people who are close to Jesus, Elizabeth and Zechariah, Mary and Joseph. Luke cares about political implications and asserts that the most important event in history happened in the most obscure corner of the Empire – Bethlehem.

This brings us to the Gospel of John which begins with an ancient hymn whose origins are lost to history. In my early twenties I memorized this hymn and used it as a meditation passage. These are the first passages I ever translated from Greek. "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God... The light shines in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it" (Jn. 1).

The word gospel means good news. And from the first syllables John asserts that at the center of all things, at the very beginning of the universe, there is a light which gives us power to become children of God. In English it repeats that the word was "with" God but the Greek is actually much more dynamic. The Word is not static but it is literally moving "toward" God.<sup>5</sup>

Studying to prepare for seeing you today I learned something that should have been obvious to me. I have always recognized that this hymn echoes the first words of the Bible. "In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth" (Gen. 1). But I didn't realize how many other books begin with the Hebrew expression "Davar (Adonai) Jahweh" translated as "The word of God came to..." and then the prophet's name: Hosea, Micah, Joel, Zephaniah, Malachi, etc. The Hebrew word "devar" means "word, speech, thing, matter, affair."<sup>6</sup>

The word creates. The word reveals the truth we long to understand. The word cries out for justice in the darkness that confounds us. It is written in Deuteronomy that, "The word is very near you; it is in your mouth and in your heart for you to observe" (Deut. 30).

For Augustine we need Christ because there is a darkness at the center of our being which he calls original sin. According to him our pride always separates us from God.

Denise Levertov's (1923-1997) Christmas poem "On the Mystery of the Incarnation" expresses this view.

"It's when we face for a moment / the worst our kind can do, and shudder to know / the taint of our own selves, that awe / cracks the mind's shell and enters the heart: / not to a flower, not to a dolphin, / to no innocent form / but to this creature vainly sure / it, and no other is god-like, God / (out of compassion for our ugly / failure to evolve) entrusts, / as guest, as brother, / the Word."<sup>7</sup>

But not all Christians believe in original sin or that darkness is at the core of our being. John Philip Newell has a forthcoming book on Celtic Christianity in which he writes about Augustine's opponent Pelagius (366-431).<sup>8</sup> He argues that Augustine's idea of original sin was perfectly suited for an empire that wanted to control bodies and manipulate the earth.

But Pelagius drew on a more ancient tradition. He moved to Rome in the early 380's and was criticized for teaching women holy scripture and theology. Not only did he believe in the sacred feminine. He also felt convinced that when we hold a newborn child, when we feel the softness and smell the sweetness of the baby's skin, when we look into that baby's eyes we are seeing a being from a deeper place. We are seeing God. Pelagius believed that what is deepest in us is "*of God not opposed to God.*"

After the sack of Rome in 410 Pelagius fled to the Middle East where Augustine sent an emissary (his student Orosius) to accuse him of heresy. Two local diocesan conventions examined Pelagius' teaching and found him innocent. But after the authorities in Rome who supported him died, he was excommunicated and banned. He returned to his homeland in Wales and continued to write. He had a sense of humor because he sometimes under the pseudonym of "Augustine."

I'm briefly going to summarize Pelagius' teaching. First, he believed in the inherent dignity of every person, that a kind of light of goodness burns in each of us. This inner nobility can get what he called "buried" by falseness and delusion. But we are fundamentally good. We experience this light by receiving the gift of illumination, the gift of the present when we see that this goodness is also at the heart of creation and in every creature.

For Pelagius no person or tradition owns the truth. There is wisdom in us but also in other cultures and religions. We can learn from other traditions of experiencing God. Pelagius also taught spiritual practices mainly around discerning the light in us. And

finally he understood that what one believes is less important than becoming like Christ who had compassion for all people and all the world.

On Christmas morning we celebrate this light. We thank God for being so intimately involved in the world. In an ecstatic moment the theologian Karl Barth (1886-1968) writes about what it feels like to know that Christ is already with us. He writes, "The word became flesh... This is the beginning of all beginnings in Christian thinking... When we say Jesus Christ, that is not a possibility which is somewhere ahead of us, but an actuality which is already behind us. With his name in our hearts and on our lips, we are not laboriously toiling uphill, but merrily coming down..."<sup>9</sup>

My dear friends, where does the story of your life begin? Does it all start in original sin or in the light which does not need ideal conditions in order to shine? We have been through so much darkness this year and we are still here because God has carried us.

The light in our hearts, in every creature and all the world, the light we see in a new baby is not static. It moves toward God. The word creates. The word reveals the truth we long to understand. The light shines in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it. Merry Christmas!

<sup>1</sup> Al Zolynas, "Under Ideal Conditions," *Under Ideal Conditions* (San Diego, CA: Latherthanever Press, 1994). <https://capa.conncoll.edu/zolynas.ideal.htm>

<sup>2</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Saint\\_Augustine\\_in\\_His\\_Study\\_\(Botticelli,\\_Ognissanti\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Saint_Augustine_in_His_Study_(Botticelli,_Ognissanti))

<sup>3</sup> Stephanie Paulsell is a professor at Harvard University and one of my favorite religious thinkers. This winter she gave a paper at the American Academy of Religion on Virginia Woolf. She is also currently serving as the Interim Minister to Harvard University. Because she mentions broken quills which do not seem to be in this image. I'm not completely sure which painting Paulsell is describing. Stephanie Paulsell, "Searching for the Beginning," Harvard Memorial Church, 8 December 2020.

<https://memorialchurch.harvard.edu/blog/searching-beginning>

<sup>4</sup> "Great art thou O Lord, and greatly to be praised; great is thy power, and thy wisdom is infinite. And man wants to praise you, man who is only a small portion of what you have created and who goes about carrying with him his own mortality, the evidence of his own sin and evidence that *Thou resisteth the proud*. Yet still man, this small portion of creation, wants to praise you. You stimulate him to take pleasure in you. Grant me, O Lord, to know and understand which should come first, prayer or praise; or, indeed, whether knowledge should precede prayer. For how can one pray to you unless one knows you?" Augustine, *Confessions* tr. Rex Warner (NY: New York, New American Library, 1963) 17 (italics retained).

<sup>5</sup> My friend Herman Waetjen translates the Greek word "pros" as "towards." Herman C. Waetjen, *The Gospel of the Beloved Disciple: A Work in Two Editions* (NY: T&T Clark, 2005) 67-8.

<sup>6</sup> <hDkylm\_IRa hGÎyDh r∞RvSa —h∞Dwh∅y\_rAbv;d.

<sup>7</sup> Denise Levertov, "On the Mystery of the Incarnation."

[https://www.journeywithjesus.net/PoemsAndPrayers/Denise\\_Levertov\\_Incarnation.shtml](https://www.journeywithjesus.net/PoemsAndPrayers/Denise_Levertov_Incarnation.shtml)

<sup>8</sup> John Philip Newell, *Sacred Earth, Sacred Soul: A Celtic Guide to Listening to Our Souls and Saving the World* (NY: HarperOne, Forthcoming 2021) 22-43.

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<sup>9</sup> "Jesus Christ is the name at whose remembrance the event arises as such, so that if Christian knowledge and Christian life are worthy of the name they can never lose their astonishment at the participation in the act of becoming which – as the Son of God once became man in time – can never become past or cease to be His act. Incarnation is the actuality of this work of God." Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics IV.2 The Doctrine of Reconciliation* tr. G. W. Bromiley (NY: T&T Clark, 1958) 46.