

Receive the Light

Genesis 1:1-5
James 1:16-25

The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere
The ceremony of innocence is drowned:

The best lack all conviction, while the worst
Are full of passionate intensity

So wrote William Butler Yeats in 1919. World War I had just ended. The West's leaders—men educated at the best schools, enlightened, progressive men—had ordered the gassing of hundreds of thousands in the trenches and had perpetuated colonial atrocities across Africa and Asia. European monarchs, many of them first cousins, had divided into two camps of enemies. The lines come from Yeat's poem The Second Coming. I cannot address their full meaning now, I can instead apply them to the Unites States of America at the close of the Trump presidency. Restated plainly, those lines might read:

Blood flows everywhere
It drowns the pretense of innocence
The best people cannot find it in themselves to act out their beliefs and principles
The worst cannot wait to express their fury

My thesis for today's sermon is this: Receive the Light or perish. The outline I will use to develop my thesis is: 1. Define the Light. 2. Contrast the Light with what

seems to control most leaders of today **on all sides**. 3. Call us to receive the Light of Christ in our private, spiritual lives. 4. Call us to share that Light with the world.

1. Define the Light. We turn to the Gospel of John, chapter one. Using interlocking images of God and Word, John writes that God existed before the start of time. God/Word created all that is. In verse four he introduces Light to the equation: "In (God) was life, and that life was the light of humanity." That Light shines in the darkness (of sin and despair), and the darkness cannot surround it. In Genesis we find the assertion that God created Light, and right early at that. The physical matter of the universe was yet void and without form. But with Light, God created a way to separate day from night, a way to impose order on chaos.

The Hebrew and Greek mindsets behind the Bible's writing delighted in poetry. Both ancient cultures embraced ambiguous, multi-layered meaning. It therefore turns out we cannot precisely define what they meant by Light. But the author of the Book of James can help us understand the biblical idea of light more clearly. He calls God the "father of lights". This phrase incorporates the meanings of light in both Genesis and John. God *is* light. God uses light to create order. The light of God surrounds darkness. Darkness cannot compete with it. And, James adds, the light of God never changes. It is truth. How can it change?

The light that brings order from chaos and guides us to truth is God. The light of God defeats darkness. When have we more needed to hear this message?

Which leads to, 2. Contrast the Light with what seems to control many leaders of today **on all sides**. What controls so many leaders today? The same things that have always controlled them: greed, ambition, revenge. Sin. And these leaders use time-tested techniques to get what they want. They inflame the hearts and minds of the masses. They tell lies, often gussied up in a sugary veneer of truth, to **mislead**. They divide the population into us vs. them. In a classic case of psychological projection they falsely characterize “them” as the very kinds of evil people they themselves are. They hold out the carrot of hope. They use the stick of intimidation. And all the while they privately mock their followers.

We now live in a crisis of several types. It is a crisis of leadership. But it is preeminently a **spiritual** crisis. We cannot solve this crisis without leaders who see the light of Christ, who know the truth, who lead according to the teachings of Jesus, teachings about justice, teachings about true wisdom, teachings about compassion. Our current crop of leaders, **on all sides**, have failed on every one of these metrics.

I presume many of you listening to these words have by now conjured up in your minds the face of one particular “leader”. (Though he will not be leading much longer). Without reservation I agree that he fits this description of a **misleader**. But I do not retreat a millimeter from my earlier comment that “leaders” on **all** sides in our fractured nation are misleading us. In every case they have used virtually identical tactics and messaging. All they had to do was substitute the names of their “enemies”. The only exception to this characterization is the majority of the Black Lives Matter

demonstrators, who had legitimate grievances and addressed them legitimately.

Please understand. When I label certain leaders evil I speak of unprincipled, demonic people seeking to promote darkness, not light. I speak not of the average organizer of a Trump parade of pickup trucks around the square. I speak rather of those who contrived to twist the rally last Wednesday into destruction and killing at our nation's capitol. I speak not of the average organizer of young people protesting injustice on a college campus. I speak rather of those shadowy manipulators of the anarchic rioters we see in Portland and Seattle, and of their cousins who continue to darken the streets of cities from coast to coast.

I say enough is enough. I say the time for the silent toleration of the continuing disintegration of our social fabric has passed. I say the continued meek acceptance of the pushing of our Christian faith to the sidelines must end. I say it is time, 3. To call us to receive the Light of Christ into our own spiritual lives. And, 4. To call us to share that Light with the world.

This is no call to a private Christianity. We followers of Jesus have a responsibility to speak to our nation. We must show it the Light. Yet the first, absolutely necessary method of pointing to the light is first to receive it ourselves. Like parents on an airplane instructed to breathe from the dropped oxygen mask **before** placing it over their children's mouths, we must receive the Light before we can show it to others. Not that we are parents and they are children. The image speaks only to

the order in which we must act. Receive the Light that you might share it.

It has never been more important to pray. I urge every one of us—including me—to pray for discernment. No matter where you stand on the issues of the day, I guarantee that people you have long trusted to give you accurate information **are not doing so**. Wherever you get your news, whomever you listen to, please pray that God might help you discern fact from fake. But pray even more that when you do see the Light, you might receive it. Receive the Light as **enlightenment**, as new understanding of why people do what they do. Receive the Light as guidance, that God might show you what you must do just as surely as God guided the children of Israel from slavery to freedom. Again I say it: pray. Pray for discernment. Pray for guidance. And pray that when these gifts are offered, you might receive them willingly, with an open mind and heart.

And so at last we come to 4., The call to share the Light with the world. God knows, the world gives precious little indication it can see the Light of Christ. Having seen the truth and power of God's will, having received the Light ourselves, we must share it. But in these fractured times, when all disagreement seems destined to be demonized, **how can we share the Light?**

First, listen respectfully to people with whom you disagree. Do not think of what you will say when they finally shut up. When it comes your turn to speak rephrase what they said to make sure you understood it. As Mark Twain said of doing good in

general, active listening in this way will, “gratify some people and astonish the rest.”

Second, do your best to build your own life on the truth and justice of God's Word. Actions do in fact speak louder than words. There can be no more powerful witness to the Light than living it. One specific way to do this would be, instead of voting for “your team”, vote for candidates whom you think would govern according to those “truths we hold to be self-evident”, according to the things Jesus taught, according to the highest, most rigorous definition of the law.

Third, when the time to speak does come, as it will when you listen and live according to the Light, have the courage to witness to your faith in a loving God who demands justice. One specific way to do this would be to communicate with your elected representatives that, as a Christian, you expect them to lead in accordance with the teachings of Jesus. Do not allow mere slivers of Christianity, limited slices of the spectrum of the church, to pretend any longer that they speak for God.

The coming days will usher in a new administration and congress. Let us, who have seen the Light, and who try to follow it ourselves, tell our elected representatives we expect honesty and accountability from them. Tell them we expect justice for all, regardless of skin color. Tell them we expect policies that give to all real freedom to strive for happiness and wealth. Tell them we expect them to ignore extreme voices, from right or left, that attempt to pull us down into darkness. Tell them we expect that when and if they stand for re-election we intend to un-elect them if they do not try to

follow the Light themselves.

Receive the light or perish. The threat of death applies to us as souls, and it applies to our nation. Rarely has the threat seemed more real or more imminent. Do your faith, and show the truth and justice of Jesus to others. Receive the light or perish. Not to choose is to choose to perish. Receive the Light.