

The Light

by Rev. Joseph Connolly

“Then God said, ‘Let there be light;’ and there was light.” — Genesis 1:3.

A little later we shall be commissioning, installing, the Transition Committee who will begin the process of searching for a new pastor. As is known and as I have stated publically, I shall be retiring in July of 2019.

And yes, that date is still 18 months away. However, because I have made that announcement this church can get a head start on the process. In fact, before a church gets to the point of seeing profiles from pastors, doing interviews, a Transition Committee works on creating a profile for a church and that can take many, many months.

And no, I will not be in any way involved in the search. To do so is a violation of ethics. And no, I will probably not stay in Norwich. If I lived here this is the only church I could not attend. That would, equally, be a violation of ethics.

That having been said, I came here in 1996. I am in my 22nd year. July of 2019 shall be in my 24th.

Given that I served two years in a five church cooperative in the great State of Maine before arriving in Norwich, I shall be in my 26th year of pastoral work, 25 full. 25 years in ministry seems satisfying given the age at which I started. I was old. And the 24 years here is a goodly number of years in any one position, especially for me.

Let me unpack that ‘especially for me’ comment. As you know (or as many of you know), I was involved in professional theater work as a writer where a job that lasts days or weeks, not years, is normal.

And theater is a tough racket. Therefore, outside of theater work I held many 9 to 5 jobs from computer operations to tour guide at South Street Seaport Museum to back office work on Wall Street— all to keep bread on the table.

Therefore, non-theater work alone takes up a lot of slots on my résumé. And with the theater work added, using one line per job, single spaced, that list runs 2 ½ pages.

Further, I was not with any single job before this longer than 4 years. So being here as long as I have was really quite a change. On the other hand, since I held so many jobs I think it has helped me in my work as a pastor. After all, I have had a multitude of life experiences.

Now that I’ve delved into that background, I want to focus on one item on that résumé— my work with the Actors’ Fund of America. The Actors’ Fund of America is a theatrical charity which supports performers and behind-the-scenes folk in the arts.

Founded in 1882, they offer social services, emergency financial assistance, counseling, affordable housing, employment and training services. They run the Lillian Booth Actors Home, both assisted living and skilled nursing, in Englewood, New Jersey.

I started out as a volunteer with them. I was later actually employed by the Fund— I left for a writing job, maybe not the best move I ever made but I left for a writing job— at which point I returned to being a

volunteer.

Let me highlight two of my volunteer duties. I am sure this does not happen any more, but back then each year the Fund had a blood drive. Give a pint of blood? You get two tickets to a Broadway show. I ran the ticket table.

Also once upon a time, during Christmas week the Fund— at the intermission of Broadway shows— passed a basket, collected money. I helped organize that. Volunteers were, generally, out of work actors. Volunteer to pass a basket? Standing room is yours to have.

The reason I'm telling you this is to explain why I did it. First, this was about helping people. The people being helped were theater people— my people.

Being a starving artist myself, I could not do something grandiose. But I could do something. And, pardon the cliché, it is always better to light a candle than to curse the night. (Slight pause.)

We find these words in the *Torah*— the teaching— in the work commonly called Genesis: “Then God said, ‘Let there be light;’ and there was light.” (Slight pause.)

It seems to me we moderns have a number of quite inaccurate fixations about Scripture. Prime among them is when people see the first two chapters of Genesis as a story about the physical creation of the world, the universe.

I want to suggest there is a related, inaccurate fixation. It is to see this story as a story about an all powerful God who commands the world, the universe into existence.

The problem with these readings is at least threefold. First, obviously, the story is about theology, not physics and, therefore, not about matter, dust. It is not even about commanding matter, dust.

Second, in most translations when God names the day and the night, the words ‘Day’ and ‘Night’ are capitalized. These words, you see, are not meant to identify aspects of a 24 hour cycle. These are proper names. Day and Night are living, breathing entities.

Third, the story is written in Hebrew. Hebrew has no command tense. If there is no command tense, the very words translated as, “Let there be light” are not a command. Of course, if the words, “Let there be light” are not a command, one does need to ponder what *is* going on here? Put differently, what *is* the *theology* being addressed? (Slight pause.)

I want to suggest light is already present in the void. It is there, real, a living, breathing entity. Light is there, real, a living, breathing entity amid the formless, disordered, ominous, threatening, rebellious, destructive chaos.

Perhaps light feels overwhelmed, dare I say frightened. But in the midst of the chaos God invites the light, itself, to be present, to be there, real— to claim it is a living, breathing entity.

When the light hears the voice of God the light takes up God on the invitation. The light affirms its own nature and... the light does shine. Thereby, the light begins to provide a place and a context for viable life. Hence, the invitation of God to ordering— this forming, this shaping of life— becomes a living, breathing,

real *possibility*. (Slight pause.)

There is no question in my mind about the theology of our heritage, about Who Christ is— Christ is the light— about who we are, about what the call of God is to us— to accept the call of God to participate in light. God invites us to the light which is already there, all around us.

When God says, “Let there be light” it is an invitation to *participate in* the ordering, forming, shaping, an invitation to participate in life giving ways. It is an invitation to movement, an invitation to the reality of hope, peace, joy, freedom, truthfulness, wisdom, love. (Slight pause.)

I started my comments by mentioning we will shortly be commissioning, installing, the Transition Committee who will begin the process of searching for a new pastor. I want to suggest this is not just an invitation from God about ordering, forming, shaping, of life. This is an invitation from God to hope, to peace, to joy, to freedom, to truthfulness, to wisdom, to love.

Why do I say that? The theology of Scripture is clear. God invites us to see what is *already* there. God invites ordering, forming, shaping *through* peace, joy, freedom, truthfulness, wisdom, love.

As a community of faith we *have* a great opportunity before us. God invites. We can and I believe we shall respond. I believe it is our calling to light a candle. Amen.

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ENDPIECE: It is the practice of the Pastor to speak after the Closing Hymn, but before the Choral Response and Benediction. This is an précis of what was said: “Sometimes things happen which can be defined only as strange or at least inexplicable. But usually when that definition is applicable there is a spiritual aspect. I was already nearly finished writing today’s meditation with its reference to The Actors’ Fund when I needed go down to the cellar in the parsonage to look for something. In the top of an open box which I am sure I had not looked at in twenty plus years were these two certificates from the Actors’ Fund to me. [The pastor holds up two framed certificates.] One indicates my life membership. The second indicates an award of merit after my second stint as a volunteer with the Actors’ Fund. I am accepting that as an affirmation that this is what I was supposed to talk about today— lighting a candle seemed to be a smart thing to do, that having happened.”

BENEDICTION: Howard Thurman was an African-American pastor, author, theologian, educator, mentor to leaders within the civil rights movement, including Martin Luther King, Jr. Thurman wrote the poem *Now the Work of Christmas Begins*. I thought it might be an appropriate Benediction this morning. “When the song of the angels is stilled, / when the star in the sky is gone, / when the kings and princes are home, / when the shepherds are back / with their flocks, / the work of Christmas begins: / to find the lost, / to heal the broken, / to feed the hungry, / to release the prisoner, / to rebuild the nations, / to bring peace / among the people, / to make music in the heart.”