

LET YOUR LIGHT SHINE
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The Fifth Sunday After the Epiphany
February 5, 2023

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be pleasing in your sight,
O Lord, my strength and my redeemer.

Today's readings contain instructions that are challenging to introverts like me who would always prefer to blend in quietly and unobtrusively, or even to disappear in crowds. But counter to these inclinations, Isaiah urges us to "shout out, do not hold back! And lift up your voice like a trumpet!" And in the Gospel, Jesus instructs us not to cover our light with a basket but instead "to let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works."

Do we really need to be *so* loud and *so* bright and shiny? Whatever happened to the idea that when you perform acts of charity, you should do it quietly and not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing? After all, you don't want to be like the hypocrites who sound a trumpet in the synagogues and on the streets, in order to be honored by men.

So when *is* it okay to sound the trumpets? I suspect that these seemingly different set of instructions are not contradictory at all, but that there is a fundamental difference in the intent of those who sound trumpets in order to be praised by others and those who do it instead in praise of God. And we can be certain that any light that the hypocrites shine is only to illuminate themselves and not to light the way for the people around them.

And this discussion about light being hidden under a basket or allowed to shine forth freely got me to thinking about light as metaphor in the Bible. It is a common and frequent metaphor. From today's opening sentence to each of the readings and the hymns, the word "light" is mentioned repeatedly.

In the Old Testament, immediately after the creation of heaven and earth, Genesis describes in one of the most beautiful and haunting sentences ever written how God's spirit moved across the face of the dark waters. And it goes on to say that He then said, "Let there be light." And he beheld that light which he had spoken into existence, saw that it was good and said, in effect "*that's* what I'm talking 'bout" and then divided the light and darkness into night and day.

And throughout the rest of the Old and New Testaments, we hear about light and how it is good: we learn that "the people who walked in darkness have seen a great light." We hear that at the Transfiguration, Jesus, Moses, and Elijah all shone brightly, and Jesus repeatedly describes himself as being the "light of the world" and you can undoubtedly fill in any number of examples where light symbolizes good.

But if light is good, what is dark? The world before God called forth the light was not bad; it was just incomplete. Night is not inherently bad; it can be a time of rest and regeneration. In those cases, dark is not bad, but it is simply the absence of light.

But there is another kind of dark, the kind that Milton referred to in *Paradise Lost* as "darkness visible." Darkness visible is not merely the absence of light but is that which "obscures the positive while highlighting the negative." And this darkness visible is anything but passive. It is the consequence of actions, actions that result from ignorance or greed, malice, or selfishness or, indeed even evil. In *Paradise Lost*, darkness visible is the creation of the devil himself, a darkness which reveals in Hell "sights of woe, regions of sorrow, doleful shades." And I believe that *this* kind of darkness is what we are being urged to counter by removing the baskets from our lights.

Thinking about this kind of darkness brings me back to the earliest and most memorable lessons I received as a child about morality and ethics. And, I'm embarrassed to say, the lessons that have stayed with me most over the years comes not from my time in Sunday School or Catholic School Chapel but instead from that great theologian Rod Serling and his television show, *The Twilight Zone*.

If you are like me and your associations with New Year's Day are not champagne, the ball dropping in Times Square or fireworks but are of binge-watching episodes of *The Twilight Zone* for the hundredth time, then you may remember the episode "I Am The Night, Color Me Black."

In that episode, a man is to be executed at sunrise in a small town whose residents have assembled to watch it, motivated by hate and anger and sadism. And sunrise doesn't come at the time predicted in *The Farmer's Almanac*. Instead, darkness prevails, and the darkness is not the result of clouds or fog but is inexplicably the darkness of the deepest night.

And the town, impatient for the execution, proceeds to the hanging. After it is done, it gets even darker still. And the minister present at the hanging declares that, if the townspeople want to discover the cause of the darkness, instead of looking to science, they should look in the mirror. He proclaims that the darkness is the result of hate, hate by the people of the town and by the man executed. And a nearby radio describes how the dark has spread all over the world and that it is dark in Vietnam, over a section of the Berlin Wall, over the area in Dallas where President Kennedy was shot, over the city of Birmingham.

The episode was filmed in 1964 and the areas covered in darkness reflects those times. But it is easy to imagine it updated to our present time when there would be new locations where darkness would prevail. Those places would include any place in which there is violence or intolerance, anyplace there is hatred of people who are different, even if those differences are the result of things completely out of those people's control. Those places would include Ukraine and Memphis.

That latter location is one that is very much on my mind as I think about the murder of Tyre Nichols and the horror and frustration that it has provoked in me. And that horror and frustration comes in part from the inhumanity of the event and in part from the sense of *déjà vu*, that sense of having been here so many times before. And it is because of this that the message about letting our lights shine becomes vivid. And it is vivid because the only way to end the horror of the darkness visible is through revealing our light, the light of love and hope, peace and justice.

Many people felt that the massive response following the killing of George Floyd was an example of a wide-scale effort to let our light out from under a basket—and it was. But we too soon allowed that effort to wane and allowed the baskets to once more obscure our light. And we continue to feel the consequences. Because, the fact is, it does not require the actions of a large number of people to plunge us into the “darkness visible” that obscures the good and allows evil to thrive. Instead, it only requires a few people to sow the seeds of evil and the rest of us to stand by silently, to keep our lights hidden under baskets.

As people of faith, we are called upon by Jesus to loudly proclaim our belief in righteousness. And that responsibility falls upon us more than others in part because too often, faith has been used as a justification for the darkest acts. Examples from history are too numerous to count. They include the killing of our Anglican predecessors for reading the Bible in English, and the violence against Catholics by Protestants when the shoe of power was on the other foot. They include the killing of innocent women as witches by people who professed to be religious leaders. They include the violence of the Inquisition.

Each of these is an example of the misuse of religion. And they are not limited to the past or to Christianity. Whether dealing with the persecution of Muslims by Hindus, Christians by Muslims, or the hatred of fundamentalist Christians for immigrants or LGBTQTI people, the persecution of the most vulnerable can be a manifestation of the worst, darkest impulses of human beings under a mask of religious belief.

We owe it to ourselves, to others and to our God to do better. We need to return to those virtues urged upon us by Jesus, the virtues of forgiveness, of hope, of faith, of love for those who are disadvantaged. These teachings are the things that are the fuel to our lights. And we need to demonstrate openly and proudly those lights, even the most introverted among us. And when we do this, we may someday be able to look at the results of our light and say, “yes, *that's* what I'm talking 'bout!”