

Light in the Window

Isaiah 58:6-12; Matthew 5:13-16

Text: Then your light shall break forth like the dawn . . .

Isaiah 58:8

Introduction

This coming Tuesday will mark the second anniversary of the death of Marcel Marceau, the great French mime—pantomime artist—who died on 22 September 2007 at the age of eighty-four. In 1947 Marceau created his famous character Bip the Clown. In one of his routines, Marceau enters a circle of light on a darkened stage and walks around and around within the light, obviously searching for something. At last a policeman approaches him, and in the language of mime asks him what he is looking for, to which Bip the Clown indicates that he has lost the key to his apartment. The policeman helps him search for it, ultimately to no avail. Finally the policeman asks Bip if he is sure that he lost the key here. “Well, no,” responds Bip. Pointing to a dark corner of the stage, he gestures: “I lost it over there.” “Then why are we looking for it here?” inquires the exasperated policeman. “Well,” says Bip, “because there is no light over there.”

Our Faith in Action focus this morning is *Illumination*. It carries with it an Old Testament mandate from Isaiah and a New Testament directive from Jesus, both of which are issued in regards to the context of darkness. *Isaiah* is the biblical book in which the prophet declared that:

*The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light,
those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness,
on them has light shined.ⁱ*

John, the author of the fourth gospel, identifies that light in the darkness as Jesus, the incarnate Word made flesh:

*In him was life, and the life was the light of all people.
The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not
overcome it.ⁱⁱ*

Later in the Gospel of John, Jesus is recorded as having admitted to this identity:

*I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in
darkness but will have the light of life.ⁱⁱⁱ*

Illumination: light penetrating the darkness. This is our central theme today.

More than the Absence of Light

Actually we need to begin by stating the obvious, for which I have a particular talent. And the obvious here is that when we speak of darkness, we are referring to something more than the simple absence of light. We are referring to those aspects of the human condition that puncture the heart, that wound us to the bone, and leave us feeling lost, alone, floundering, struggling to regain our emotional equilibrium. We are referring to the anxious moments when fear seizes us and we feel helpless. We are referring to those times and conditions of gloom, obscurity, ignorance, or sorrow that throw us into a darkness of the soul, a dark night of the soul, a dark night of the psyche, into a paroxysm of despair, devoid of hope, with every ounce of optimism shredded by apparent *no exits*.

The apartment key for which Bip the Clown is looking is a metaphor for the key to the mysteries of life, and one does not find the key to life’s mysteries in the darkness but, rather, in the light.

*I have been one acquainted with the night.
I have walked out in rain—and back in rain.
I have outwalked the furthest city light.*

*I have looked down the saddest city lane.
I have passed by the watchman on his beat
And dropped my eyes, unwilling to explain.*

*I have stood still and stopped the sound of feet
When far away an interrupted cry
Came over houses from another street,*

*But not to call me back or say good-by;
And further still at an unearthly height,
One luminary clock against the sky*

*Proclaimed the time was neither wrong nor right.
I have been one acquainted with the night.^{iv}*

Let Your Light So Shine

Let's get right to the point: Jesus' directive is without equivocation whatsoever. Let your light shine before others. You are the light of the world. As we mentioned earlier, in John's gospel, Jesus contended that he is the light of the world. So now he is cauterizing our identity as well: anyone in Christ, the light of the world, is also the light of the world. Let your light so shine before others, that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven. Jesus appeals to our reasoning: why would anyone light a lamp and place it under a bushel basket? There's no sense to that whatsoever. Rather, one must put in on a lampstand so that it may give light to all in the house. Here's the directive from the Master: Illuminate the darkness. Let your light penetrate the night . . . penetrate the dark night of those around us.

When we refer to those aspects of the human condition that puncture the heart, that wound us to the bone, and leave us feeling lost, alone, floundering, struggling to regain our emotional equilibrium or when we refer to the dark night of the soul, the dark night of the psyche, it is conceivable that you and I—who have been born of good advantage—do not relate to that darkness at all. It is rather to the darkness around us to which we are asked to look, that is, to the whole family of humanity in the house: the poor in the inner city, the lonely in our suburbs, the destitute of the world, the immigrant, the illegal alien, the refugee, the homeless of Pittsburgh. Let your light so shine before these others.

But How?

But how? The method is always as difficult to discern as the mandate is to hear. How shall we let our light shine before others? How shall we illuminate the darkness of others? How shall we penetrate their deadly nightshade?

No doubt the clue lies with Isaiah. Here in chapter 58 the prophet is addressing the people of Israel in the southern kingdom of Judah. In verses 1-5 it becomes clear that the people are faithful in their religious practices yet are ethically bankrupt. They keep the fasts; they exercise devout piety; they delight in the nearness of God, seeking God every day; they profess to be pious people for whom worship is an inspiration and a refuge. They are admirably persistent in their religiosity, but this religiosity has not brought them divine favor or the blessing of God, for they found their satisfaction in formal religion rather than in social conscientiousness. They had allowed their religion to spoil their morality. They had given over to religious piety while forsaking ethical practices. In truth, their daily morning worship could not legitimize their afternoon beatings of their slaves. Their cozying up to God in the temple could in no way justify the harsh treatment of debtors in the streets. Their sitting in sackcloth and ashes intoning the psalms and incanting the Torah could not excuse their selling off bankrupted family into slavery or political refugees into bondage. The *error deeply bred in their bone*^v was simply the erroneous expectation that their self-denying fasts—their methodical devoutness—merited God's gratitude. This was the dislocated North Pole that sabotaged their moral compass.^{vi}

At God's behest, Isaiah calls the people to task with a compelling mandate: *let your light break forth like the dawn*. The fast that God wants is not self-denial but loving service. The fast that God wants is to loose the bonds of injustice; to undo the thongs of the yoke; to break every bondage; to let the oppressed go free; to share your bread with the hungry; to bring the homeless poor into your house; and to clothe the naked. Then your light shall break forth like the dawn.

And it follows, as the night the day,^{vii} that as the fulfillment of Isaiah's messianic prophecy, what the Christ wants from us is not self-validating self-denial but, rather, loving service and social conscientiousness: *let you light shine . . . set it on a lampstand that it may give light to all in the house*.

Practically speaking, however, there is no way we can loose all the bonds of all injustice. There is no way we can undo all the thongs of all yokes, or to break all bondage for all people. There is no way we can assure the liberation of everyone who is oppressed, or even to share our bread with all the hungry, or to bring all the homeless poor into our houses or to clothe all the naked.

But two weeks from today, we shall beautify the grounds of our neighbor—Family Hospice. We shall prepare food for Light of Life Mission and assemble Kitchen Kits for addicted and abused homeless women. Then our light shall break forth like the dawn.

That's a beginning, isn't it? Something to build on, isn't it? And who can say where it may end?^{viii}

It may very well end with our light being a lamp to someone's feet and an illumination to someone's path. It may be what is needed to light someone's darkness, to heal someone's wound, to give direction to someone who is lost, to comfort someone who is alone, to stabilize someone who is floundering, to regain someone's emotional equilibrium, to calm an anxious spirit, to encourage a timid soul, to restore hope to a desperate one, to quell fears in the dark night of the soul.

Conclusion

One of the great works of literature that undoubtedly many of us read in high school was Charles Dickens' eighth novel titled *David Copperfield*, perhaps his favorite novel and one that included many autobiographical themes. As you recall, one of the most endearing characters is Daniel Peggotty, a Yarmouth fisherman on the coast of class-conscious England, who dearly loves and cares for his orphan niece, Little Em'ly—David Copperfield's childhood sweetheart. Wanting to be a lady of nobility, Em'ly elopes with an aristocratic schoolfellow and friend of David, James Steerforth, who actually seduces Em'ly and later abandons her. Mr. Peggotty sets out in a determined search for his niece. Just before he leaves his house—a converted boat on Yarmouth Beach—he sets a lighted candle in the window, turns to David and explains:

'My wishes is, sir, as it shall look, day and night, winter and summer, as it has always looked, since she first know'd it. If ever she should come wandering back, I wouldn't have the old place seem to cast her off, you understand, but seem to tempt her to draw nigher to 't, and to peep in, maybe, like a ghost, out of the wind and rain, through the old winder, at the old seat by the fire. Then, maybe, Mas'r Davy, seein' none but Misses Gummidge there, she might take heart to creep in, trembling; and might come to be laid down in her old bed, and rest her weary head where it was once so gay.'

'Every night,' said Mr. Peggotty, 'as reg'lar as the night comes, the candle must be stood in its old pane of glass, that if ever she should see it, it may seem to say "Come back, my child, come back!"'^{ix}

You know as well as I do that there are many who wander about in the midnight of their despair or in the shadows of their shattered dreams or in their layers of loneliness or in their deserts of dejection or in their islands of isolation. And were they to wander anywhere near here, they could look up from their midnight dread and see against the black sky a lighted steeple: the steeple of Bower Hill Community Church with a light that penetrates the darkness. Every night, *as reg'lar as the night comes*, that light must break forth like the dawn, that if ever anyone should see it, it may seem to say,

"Come here, my beloved, come here!"

There is a place for you in this circle of light.”

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Notes

ⁱ Isaiah 9:2

ⁱⁱ John 1:4-5

ⁱⁱⁱ John 8:12

^{iv} Robert Frost, *Acquainted with the Night*

^v A similar phrase is found in Anne Morrow Lindbergh’s *Gift from the Sea*

^{vi} For background information on this passage, please see *The Interpreter’s Bible, Isaiah*, pp. 678-682

^{vii} William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, I, 3, l. 75

^{viii} Refrain from “Why Can’t I Speak?/That’s a Beginning,” sung by Niko and the Widow, from the musical *Zorba the Greek*

^{ix} Charles Dickens, *David Copperfield*, Chapter 32, “The Beginning of a Long Journey”