

What We Reflect¹

Isaiah 60:1-6

Rev. Dan Schumacher

Let's pray.

Most Gracious God,

May the ears of our hearts,
the eyes of our mind be opened.

Speak new words to us,
and let us see and hear deeply;
and be transformed and responsive
to your claim on our lives.
Through Christ, our Lord, amen.

Who doesn't love the moon?

Sooner or later, doesn't everybody have to look up, one night at least — maybe a great many nights — in wonder at the moon?

The moon hanging low over a lake or an ocean. A bright white moon shining over snow. The thinnest, needle-sharp crescent moon. The huge burnt-orange harvest moon rising. And we say, "Look at that! Look at that moon."

But it's just a rock! It's just a cold, sterile rock; a landscape of nothing that gives no light at all from itself. All it does is get shined on by the sun — which we marvel at. But what we're marveling at is sunshine on a rock!

Moonlight is sunlight reflected in the dark.

It's the same with the planets. Look into the night sky and you can tell which of those lights in the night sky are planets, because they're the ones not twinkling. Stars twinkle, because stars are burning. Planets don't, because they are reflecting light, that's all.

Orbiting the star that is our sun, that light shines on their surface and we see it as light. Our planet does the same. Earth shines with steady light that we don't make. For us here it's the blessing of daylight, but for millions of miles in space it is visible as an unblinking blue steady light reflected from the star that is our sun.

And the world all around is filled with smaller instances of the very same thing. We see how the water shines when light is on it. Or a temple shines, or a church or an aspen

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tree in the fall or the face of a mountain or the face of a human. When it's lifted to another light, our faces can shine.

And the prophet Isaiah makes an image of this for human life in the presence of God:

"Arise, shine, for your light has come,
God's glory has come upon you...
Then you shall see, and you shall be radiant" (Is. 60:1, 5).

The presence of God is the sun. We are to rise to it like the planets and the moon, like the mountains and the waves — and shine. And light like that is to overcome what Isaiah calls "thick darkness."

But what is *thick* darkness?

Can't see a thing. Can't see your hand in front of your face. Can't see a path. Can't see possibility. Can't see what is right. Can't see the real truth. Can't see *hope*...

So a world of *thick* darkness, *deep* darkness is a world of people wandering sightless or lashing out or immobilized — stuck where they are. Thick darkness means ignorance, dullness, pointlessness, anxiety, rage, despair. Friends, there is too much of that in the world, and there is too much of that in us.

But there is light.

God is light because God is love, and the first thing love says is, "Let there be *light!*" God's light shining in darkness. And those who turn their lives toward that light and look to it, they shine like the planets, like the rising moon. "Arise, shine, for your light has come upon you." Now, you look and you be radiant.

One reason to love an image like that is that it takes some pressure off of you and me, because maybe we wish our lives were more like a star shining. But we go at it all wrong, looking to find fire in ourselves, to *get* it going, *keep* it going. Looking to find fire given to us by somebody else. "C'mon baby, light my fire." Only they can't do it. It's like trying to light a fire with soggy matches, trying to keep flames going with green branches.

I don't know about you, but I'd love for my life to be more like a torch. But, the truth is, I *fizzle*. It's exhausting to keep huffing and puffing and performing as if your life was to be like some kind of star. And then when you fail — to sink to the conclusion that there is nothing but darkness in you.

It isn't true, says the prophet. You do not have to be what you are not. You are not the sun and don't have to try to be! You are not the source of life for your world, the center around which others try to find their orbit.

But you can be like the moon. And, in the end, that's all that's ours to do: be present to the true light, be open to it, available to it – and let our lives reflect the light of God, each in our own way.

So maybe the core question ought to be this: to what are we most truly paying attention? Where have we set our gaze? As busy and as challenging as our lives may be, what is the essential attention of our living?

If it's mostly on ourselves – our fears, desires, our self-loathing, or self-promoting – that is a pretty thick darkness.

Or if the gaze of our lives is set on the people around us – how to please them, what they think of us, what we think of them – more darkness; thick, deep darkness.

But to live a life that is turned toward God, facing God, looking to God – who is love, goodness, compassion, justice, peace. If our attention, our devotion, our reception is God-facing, then our lives will come to reflect God.

The Christian mystic, Evelyn Underhill, once said, “We tend to become that which we behold.” What we dwell on most will dwell in us. And if we look to the light, we will become radiant.

And, then, something truly miraculous happens. God uses us as some small light in someone else's darkness.

Several years ago now, I heard a story on our local public radio station that caught my attention. It was from a small segment called “Peak Perspectives” written by Matt Cavanaugh, a lieutenant colonel in U.S. Army and resident of Manitou Springs. He said:

“‘The people who live in darkness have seen a great light.’ So began one of our minister's sermons this past winter.

That's all I heard, sitting with the pack of wild baboons known as my daughters. They've actually spit out communion bread before at church, which was more than a little awkward.

But I want to tell you a nicer story, give you a glimpse into our minister's work – how she meets her church's mission statement to ‘feed people, all ways.’

A few years ago my then 6-year-old had a seizure. I had been overseas in Korea the previous year – my wife had to do multiple emergency room trips alone – and when I was finally there for one, I didn't know what to do.

If you ever want to know helplessness, watch a loved on's body shut down and have absolutely no ability to stop it. It was like watching her drown and doing nothing.

We got through it, and the next morning, in the dark, on my run, I stopped, put my hands on my knees, felt so ashamed and such a failure as a father that I couldn't stop sobbing.

A few days later I was back on my knees, this time holding my daughter's hand, both of us kneeling for communion. As she always does, our minister asked my daughter, 'Would you like a blessing?'

It seems like the simplest thing — a gentle touch to the forehead and some kind words. And yet, in that moment, it meant so much more. In that moment, I felt better. At peace" ("Peak Perspectives," KRCC, Oct. 22, 2020).

That's the thing, isn't it? Even a little, bitty light — like a kind smile or a hand-written note or a simple blessing — can make a world of difference when the darkness is *thick*.

We don't give enough credit to the small things — the small ways in which we might reflect God's light. Did you know that the Bible in Zechariah 4:10 instructs us not to despise the day of small things?

God is constantly reminding us that we cannot all do great things, but we can do small things with great love. And when we do anything with great love, we become the very best kind of reflection of our God.

I've shared this story with you before, but it's one of those that's always worth re-telling:

I have an acquaintance named Taylor Fields who served in New York's Lower East Side at a little place called Graffiti Ministries. And for over a quarter of a century, Taylor's primary congregation was the Lower East Side's homeless population. They'd come to church and Bible study, they'd pray with one another, they'd serve each other in the food pantry and clothes closet, and they'd forgive each other when tempers flared or consuming addictions crept back into lives. It is what Taylor affectionately refers to as "loser-friendly Christianity."

In one of his books chronicling his adventures as pastor to the homeless, he writes:

"I remember hearing a preacher talk once about an intense word study he was involved in concerning the word *Hallelujah!* Of course, literally we know *Hallelujah* means 'praise God,' but this man wanted to find a true equivalent in our own language and culture. After great pains and much research, he boiled down all of his studies to this one solitary phrase: 'Hot dog, this is it!'"

"So," Taylor continues, "we at Graffiti began borrowing his contemporary phrase. No matter how hard or depressing the day turned, we would try to find one good thing that happened and shout, 'Hot dog, this is it!' As we saw the number of victories begin to outnumber the defeats, we would cheer, 'Hot dog,

this is it!' We even began to shout it in the middle of church services. Sometimes, Victor, who spoke mostly Spanish, stood up in the middle of my sermon and shouted, 'Hallelujah, this is a hot dog!' The words weren't exactly right, but we all knew what he meant" (*Mercy Streets*, 181).

Friends, I know that it is painful at times and I know that there are mornings when we look in the mirror and we don't like the person looking back at us. I know that we have rooms in our hearts, minds, and souls that we'd rather close the door on than to ever face again. I know that often times the hardest person to forgive is ourself. I know sometimes the darkness seems too thick to ever be overcome.

But "Hot dog, this is it!": it turns out that our hope rests not in ourselves, but in a God who is more than sufficient to work in our lives

"Hot dog, this is it!": it turns out that you don't have to be a star; you just have to be a moon.

Hallelujah, this is the hot dog: God is not through with us yet!

"Arise, shine, for our light has come,
God's glory has come upon us...
Now we shall see, and we shall be radiant" (Isaiah 60:1, 5).

Amen.