

"In Your Light We See Light"

Holy God, we gather around Scripture this morning yearning to hear Your voice. Speak the truth of Your Gospel afresh in our hearts, gracious Lord. Speak, that we may know You more deeply; speak, that we may embody Your grace more boldly in this beautiful and broken world. May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be always acceptable in Your sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

On this chilly January morning, I rejoice to be with you in this sacred space. How beautiful it is here! The combination of 15th-century stained glass and contemporary translucent and clear glass is stunning. I worship regularly at St. Thomas's in New Haven; the gorgeous stained glass in that sanctuary spurs reflection on moments from the life of Christ. I also worship in a Congregational chapel where I teach; that space has tall windows of clear glass, wonderful for meditation; they draw the eye toward the beauty of God's creation. Here you have all of it: the storied richness of color, the gentleness of translucence, and the invitation of transparency. Stained glass, translucent glass, clear glass: each in its way representing how God's light breaks into our lives.

So it's been a rainy few days where I live in Old Saybrook: less *light* in the past few days and a lot more *water*. The road I take to get to I-95 runs along the shore, and it regularly floods. Earlier in the week, after a pounding rainstorm, the marsh on both sides of the road had water higher than I have ever seen it. Just the tips of the

marsh grasses showed above the water. Maybe I should worry—we're new there, and it's the first time we've lived where there is a marked evacuation route! But I love the salt marsh environment so much—on gentle summer mornings and stormy winter afternoons alike. The extremes of high and low tide make for astonishing transformations in the ecology. So much life bursts from the reeds and rushes of the salt marsh! Seagulls and ospreys and hawks wheeling overhead, bunker and trout and bluefish swimming in the deep water, minnows flashing through the shallows, otters playing in the streams and foxes denning in the thickets: life in the marsh is irrepressible! And the play of light and water is breathtaking.

The Psalmist, too, knows about light and water. Praising God's love, the ancient poet likens our relationship with God to drinking from a river of delights. "With you is the *fountain of life*," the Psalmist sings; "*in your light we see light*." A powerful word of grace, Psalm 36—and needed, because sometimes we journey through arid places, don't we? Sometimes we strain to see the light.

When we consider how *long* justice can take—how entrenched are the prejudices our communities harbor, how fierce the conflicts, how monumental the structures of oppression¹—it can seem that we are staggering through a desert whose sands stretch beyond the horizon.

When we consider the losses we've suffered—a cherished opportunity gone, a transition unfolding before we're ready, a beloved life extinguished—it can seem that we are groping to find our way in a dark place, a place of grief and absence.

Some days, *yes*, our burdens exhaust us.

Some days, gloom casts long shadows over our spiritual imagination.

It is into those *desert times*, those *times of darkness* that the Psalmist sings his song:

"With you is the fountain of life; in your light we see light."

But really? We have to ask: in this world in which so many suffer deprivation and harm? in which unfettered greed drives so many economies? in which violence convulses so many communities? The Holy One as fountain of life-giving water and radiant light: *that's* something the Church gets to sing in today's world? Now, granted, St. Paul's has an amazing choir. (Kudos, really, for the exquisite music you offer. It's inspiring.) But in this world riven by conflict and pain, how does *any* choir dare to sing that psalm? That's *foolishness*, you might say.

Yes. Yes, it is.

And it's Gospel.

"With you is the fountain of life; in your light we see light." Scripture has spoken this Gospel truth since ancient days. "Let there be light," the divine Voice sang, and it was so: light pierced the darkness of primeval chaos even before the sun, moon,

and stars had been formed.² And water: Moses struck the rock and water gushed out, giving life to desperate nomads wandering in the wilderness.³ Isaiah promised that God would lead a traumatized people back from exile. "Waters shall break forth in the wilderness ... the burning sand shall become a pool, and the thirsty ground springs of water,"⁴ the prophet sang. The iron grip of Babylon *was* broken, and God's people *did* come home, rejoicing, to remake Jerusalem as a city in which the LORD would be their everlasting light.⁵

God as fountain; God as light! The prophet Ezekiel heard the glory of God as the rushing of mighty waters, witnessed its radiance illuminating the whole earth.⁶ Ezekiel saw the river of life flowing across the Temple threshold and out into a post-apocalyptic landscape, making stagnant waters fresh and revivifying all of creation!⁷ The book of Revelation takes up this magnificent vision, inviting us to imagine the "water of life . . . flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb," a sea glittering like crystal in front of the throne.⁸

"With you is the fountain of life; in your light we see light." Your choir dares to sing this because Scripture dares to claim it, over and over again. "With you is the fountain of life," the scribes whispered even when slavery in Egypt had broken the bodies of *generations* of their people. "In your light we see light," the poets gasped even when powerlessness had left their communities *on their knees* before their enemies.

Creation is real.

And, my brothers and sisters, redemption is real . . .

in God's light—because God does not see as we see.

Where we see only darkness and tumult, *God sees* . . . and light and order come into being: plants yielding seeds of every kind, trees bearing fruit, bluefish and otters and foxes all leaping forth—called by Love.⁹

Where we see only wilderness and thirst and fear, *God sees* . . . and water gushes from every rock, bolstering our resolve, creating new resilience in pilgrims on the journey—guided by Love.

Where we see only the barrenness of distance and the despair of captivity, *God sees* . . . and springs of water deepen, oases grow green with reeds and rushes, and desert flowers burst into bloom—created by Love.

"They have no wine," Mary said.

And so Jesus revealed his glory.

His disciples believed in Him,

and we follow, too, as best we can,

our glorious Lord of love.¹⁰

One way or another,

dancing or shuffling or staggering,

we get ourselves into this sanctuary

to approach One who is Living Water.¹¹

One way or another,

pulling each other along,

we get ourselves to this altar

and sing "Holy, holy, holy" to One who is the Light of the World.¹²

"With you is the fountain of life; in your light we see light."

Gospel truth—the truth of *Love*, from before time and forever.

Thanks be to God, and Amen.

Carolyn J. Sharp

17 January 2016

Epiphany 2C

Isaiah 62:1-5, Psalm 36:5-10, 1 Cor 12:1-11, John 2:1-11

Preached at St. Paul's on the Green, Norwalk, Connecticut

¹ This morning, I am mindful of the intractability of racism and White supremacy in the United States. Tomorrow is the federal holiday Martin Luther King, Jr. Day. Signed into law in 1983, it was resisted by a number of states, notably (but not only) North Carolina and other states in the Deep South. MLK Jr. Day was not officially observed by all 50 states until 2000, and Alabama, Arkansas, and Mississippi

observe it in combination with the birthday of Confederate general Robert E. Lee.

In recent years, U.S. activism to combat White racism has focused on the enormous bias against non-White offenders that has been documented in our judicial system. Special attention has been paid to inequities evident in policing practices and carceral sentencing. See James Samuel Logan, [*Good Punishment? Christian Moral Practice and U.S. Imprisonment*](#) (Eerdmans, 2008), Michelle Alexander, [*The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*](#) (The New Press, 2012), and the grassroots activism in print and social media known as the [Black Lives Matter](#) movement.

Oppression against LGBTQ folks, trans* people, and other sexual and gender minorities is proving to be entrenched as well, although excellent strides have been made in the U.S., not least in the courageous witness of the Episcopal Church. Developments this past week at the primatial level of the Anglican Communion have shown that deep prejudice against gay and queer folks still animates the views of many Christian leaders across the globe with regard to biblical hermeneutics, theology, and Christian ethics.

² Genesis 1:3.

³ See Exodus 17.

⁴ Isaiah 35:6-7.

⁵ Isaiah 60:19-20.

⁶ Ezekiel 43:2; cf. 1:24.

⁷ Ezekiel 47:1-12. "Post-apocalyptic landscape": note that Ezekiel's vision of the eschatological Temple (chapters 40-48) is placed after the depiction of a cosmic battle against Gog and Magog (chapters 38-39).

⁸ Rev 22:1; cf. 4:6, 15:2.

⁹ In these three illustrations of God-as-Love acting to redeem, I seek to tie God's work in the Creation, the Exodus, and the return from the Babylonian diaspora to the central Johannine claim that God in Christ is a God of love. See John 3:16, 13:1, 15:12-17; 1 John 4.

¹⁰ See the opening verse of #149 in the Episcopal *Hymnal 1982* [words: Thomas H. Cain; tune: *Old 124th*, harm. Charles Winfred Douglas]: "Eternal Lord of love, behold your Church/ walking once more the pilgrim way of Lent,/ Led by your cloud by day, by night your fire,/ moved by your love and toward your presence bent:/ far off yet here—the goal of all desire."

¹¹ See John 4:10 and 7:37-38. God is said to be Living Water also in the book of Jeremiah, in two passages that use the unusual noun for "fountain" (rendered as

"well" in the John Goss psalm setting sung by the choir) found in Psalm 36 in the phrase **מְקוֹר חַיִּים**. Jeremiah 2:13 and 17:13 both identify God as **מְקוֹר חַיִּים**.

¹² John 8:12.