



Grace Church

The Rev. Dr. Matthew Calkins  
Rector

## Three Lights, Connected

### Sermon for Epiphany 5, *Candelaria*, February 5, 2017

*Readings:* Malachi 3:1-4; Hebrews 2:14-18; Luke 2:22-40; Psalm 84

*Sermon text:* Guided by the Spirit, Simeon came into the temple; and when the parents brought in the child Jesus, to do for him what was customary under the law, Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying, "Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace, according to your word; for my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel." Luke 2:25-32

I have adopted a new daily devotional. It starts, as usual, with getting a cup of coffee. Then I sit down, open up my laptop and go online. But instead of going straight to *The New York Times*—which is not lifting my spirits these days—I go to [apod.nasa.gov](http://apod.nasa.gov). That takes me to the astronomy picture of the day at NASA's website. It is always glorious. This morning it was a closeup of Tetrys, a giant moon of Saturn. We have a satellite circling there and next year it will plunge past the ring and into the atmosphere of the huge planet. Often the picture is taken by the Hubble telescope and is of a distant galaxy or nebula. Incredible shapes and colors. Take a look sometime at "the eye of God" (Helix nebula), a blue iris surrounded by clouds of grey. Or the towers of a supernova. You will be lost, as the hymn has it, "in wonder, love and praise" (last line of "Love divine, all loves excelling," which we will sing at the close of the service).

Awe and wonder are not responses particular to those who believe in God as creator of this universe. Anyone should feel that, contemplating the immensity and power of the heavens. But if there is no God, to whom give praise? I think our longing to praise and love our Creator is a one of the motivations of faith, not "evidence" but yet a reason.

In the biblical creation myth, as told in the first chapter of Genesis, in the beginning, even before there was time, there was only a formless nothing, a watery void—no matter, no space, no time. Then God said, "Let there be light."

Boom. An explosion of being, of energy, the ongoing unfolding of time and space. Current scientific cosmology describes a tremendous initial expansion, in fractions of seconds, and then, as energy cooled, matter coalescing in the form of gas and then particles and then stars and planets and other objects and fields—a process of millions and billions of years. The Biblical account, quite unscientifically,

puts the creation of the sun and moon and stars on the fourth day. It calls the sun and moon the greater and the lesser lights. Myth and science, two ways of telling the same story. The universe had a beginning and now, here we are.

So, consider our sun—and all the stars—as one kind of light. Star light. Each star an immense furnace of thermonuclear reaction generating heat and light. And our planet, third from the sun, not too hot so that water will vaporize but not too cold so that it will freeze, in that sweet and rare spot of being like Mama Bear's porridge, just right for the creation of life.

O praise God. Brother Sun and Sister Moon, all stars and all galaxies. Praise God and sing a new song in the key of light, the music of the spheres.

There is another kind of light, much smaller, often hidden, easily extinguished. "This little light of mine," the children will sing later—we all know the song. I'm going to let it shine. The theme is taken from Jesus' remark in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7) that you are the salt of the earth and the light of the world. And light is not meant to be hidden but held up for all the world to see. So do not keep your good thoughts to yourself, your good deeds to wishes and somedays. Let your light so shine that all the world may see, and so the light may be kindled in them and passed, as courage (or fear) often is.

This is the light of life, soul light. The Holy Spirit is God at work here: "the Lord and giver of life" as we say in the Nicene Creed. We are, as Jesus said, a temple of the Holy Spirit. Life—especially life that has reached consciousness and moral awareness and begun to grasp truth and apprehend beauty and hunger and thirst for righteousness, as human life has—is precious. It seems to be very rare in this great universe, for it takes quite a confluence of favorable conditions. Even now, all planetary life could become extinct well before the sun explodes (still have a few billion years there). Don't take it for granted—and of course most of us know how short life can be. Yet in each life there are many points of choice. Many moral decisions, including whether to even question our cultural conditioning, or how far to curb our natural appetites, or who to consider as friend and who as foe. We are guided by our conscience as well as society's laws and customs. When must we obey our conscience and risk our standing as citizens or members of a tribe or club? How is conscience formed? Is morality relative? Are all religions equally valid ways of expressing faith and hope? What standards shall we use, and how do we justify choosing this one?

This morning, the fifth Sunday of Epiphany, a season when we speak about God made manifest, we are also celebrating the feast of The Presentation of our Lord Jesus Christ at the Temple, and the Purification of the Blessed Virgin Mary. A long title for a day that falls on February 2, and is traditionally known as Candlemas (in English, *Candelaria* in Spanish). A day that is mid-point between winter solstice and spring equinox—connecting sun and Son. On this day the infant Jesus was brought to the Temple and a ritual offering given (the Presentation). It was also the time after delivery when the mother having taken a ritual bath can return to the outside world (the Purification). The great part of the story (and only Luke tells it) is that as the infant is brought into the Temple an amazing recognition takes place. The old man Simeon, waiting for years on the promise of the Holy Spirit that before he died he would see the long-awaited Messiah, sees Jesus and recognizes him as the One. How we do not know. But Luke has given him a wonderful speech (just as he has generously given speeches to Zechariah and Mary). "Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace, according to your word; for my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel." (Luke 2:30-32). The aged prophetess Anna echoes his blessing and praise.

Simeon recognizes that Jesus is not only the Messiah of Israel but a light to all people, revealing the Way of the one God to the whole world. We see this Way articulated in the Sermon on the Mount and lived in the life of Jesus. Christians are those from among all the nations who have vowed to follow him in the Way. The claim we make about him remains startling and bold: that the man Jesus was and is the very Logos—Word, image, reason, pattern or way—of the invisible God (Colossians 1:15). He is, to put it in a different cultural frame, the Tao of Humanity (Confucius: *ren*) made historical.

I don't know about you, but I accept this claim and follow Christ as Lord and his Way as the best guide to a well-lived life. For me, as for millions of others, he connects the dots. The light of Christ ties together heaven and earth, objective and subjective, truth and goodness.

So there you have it: three lights, Father, Holy Spirit and the Son. God above, God within and God with and for us. And Christ is the guiding light who brings together the other two. Hold on him, to his words and deeds, my beloved friends, "as to a light shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts (2 Peter 1:19).

Here's a passage from an ancient author which I came across while preparing this sermon. Thus old kindles new, and the faith of our ancestors reaches out to our children.

Behold then, the candle alight in Simeon's hands. You must light your own candles by enkindling them at his, those lamps which the Lord commanded you to bear in your hands. So come to him and be enlightened that you do not so much bear lamps as become them, shining within yourself and radiating light to your neighbors. May there be a lamp in your heart, in your hand and in your mouth: let the lamp in your heart shine for yourself, the lamp in your hand and mouth shine for your neighbors. The lamp in your heart is a reverence for God inspired by faith; the lamp in your hand is the example of a good life; and the lamp in your mouth are the words of consolation you speak.

Then, when the lamp of this mortal life is extinguished, there will appear for you who had so many lamps shining within you the light of unquenchable life, and it will shine for you at the evening of your life like the brightness of the noonday sun.

-Guerric of Igny c.1070-1157 (quoted from Robert Atwell, *Celebrating the Seasons*)

In the name of Christ, Amen.

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