

Easter 6 C: May 22, 2022

All Saints', Littleton, NH

The Rev. Curtis Metzger

Acts 16: 9-15

Psalm 67

Revelation 21: 10, 22-22:5)

John 14: 23-29

### The Light of Christ

This morning I want to focus on the lesson from the Revelation of John and the Gospel, but I thought I'd start with a small diversion into the story from Acts and include a little map about the journey that is recorded there. This is known as Paul's second missionary journey and he really gets around the known world at the time. For some time before this trip to Greece he had been casting about in Asia/Phrygia/Galatia, thinking that God wanted him there, but then the vision came to go to Greece, or specifically that part of Greece known as Macedonia. And so he set sail by way of the island of Samothrace and arrived at Neapolis and then on to Phillipi (named for Phillip the II of Macedon who conquered it in 356BC, father of Alexander the Great). It was here that Paul found his first European convert!—a woman, Lydia, who was a dealer in purple cloth.

Now purple cloth was something that was prized in the ancient world, mostly because it was rare and reserved for nobles and kings. It was known as Tyrian Purple or Phoenician purple, named for the port city, Tyre, where it originally came from in Phoenicia, now modern Lebanon and northern Israel. Phoenicia, in fact, means "land of purple". What made it rare is that the dye that was used was extracted from a family of sea snails and it took tens of thousands of them to create just a little dye. The color tended not to fade and actually became richer looking with weather and sunlight. So, as you might imagine, Lydia, was actually of woman of some means; and as the lesson say, she had an open heart and was a "worshipper of God"—she was a seeker! Its interesting to note that the first European convert to Christianity was a well-to-do woman merchant! So there's your little Biblical history lesson for the day....and now on to something more esoteric!

But this morning I really want to start by talking about Christ the Lamb of God, from the Revelation reading, who will be the lamp/light in the heavenly city. In fact, he is already the light for us, as he said once, “I am the light of the world, whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.” (John 8:12) Now to our modern ears this translation sounds rather self-aggrandizing, and somewhat not what we generally think of Jesus. But let me ask you to reconsider a deeper meaning behind this saying. I don’t think Jesus was saying he was the best or that he, in his humanity, was bigger or better than anyone else. If you understand him in the context of all that he taught and of the notions of light and darkness in theological terms used at the time, then you can begin to see Jesus as ‘the way’ to light and seeing spiritually. It should not be lost that he also starts the sentence with the great name for God in Hebrew: “I am”—creating something of a double entendre.

The nature of light is to reveal things—so we can see! By walking in his way, by walking in the light, we can see! In Richard Rohr’s book, The Universal Christ: How a forgotten reality can change everything we see, hope for, and believe, he explains his central premise is that the notion of the Christ is not just a last name for Jesus, but is deeply wrapped up in an understanding that this Christ is part of the ‘first principle’ of the universe, or as John would say, ‘the Logos’, the Word—and was and is part of the nature of the Holy One who is all and in all. Paul echoes this in one of his letters when he says, “*where there is neither Greek nor Jew, circumcised nor uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave nor free, but Christ is all and in all.*”

Rohr puts it this way:

Remember, light is not so much what you directly see as that by which you see everything else.....Jesus Christ is the amalgam of matter and spirit put together in one place, so we ourselves can put it together in all places, and enjoy things in their fullness. It can even enable us to see as God sees, if that is not expecting too much.

Scientists have discovered that what looks like darkness to the human eye is actually filled with tiny particles called “neutrinos,” slivers of light that pass through the entire universe. Apparently, there is no such thing as total darkness anywhere, even though the human eye thinks there is. John’s Gospel was more accurate than we realized when it described Christ as “a light that darkness cannot overcome” (1:5) Knowing that the inner light of things cannot be eliminated or destroyed is deeply hopeful. And as if that is not enough, John’s choice of an active verb (“The true light.....was coming into the world,” 1:9) shows us that the Christ Mystery is not a one-time event, but an ongoing process throughout time—as constant as the light that fills the universe.....My point is this: When I know that the world around me is both the hiding place and the revelation of God, I can no longer make a significant

distinction between the natural and the supernatural, between the holy and the profane.....What a difference this makes in the way I walk through the world, in how I encounter every person I see in the course of my day! (p.14-15)

This idea is a deeply mystical understanding of Christ and is something that the Eastern church kept a better grasp on. It is reflected in some of their iconography, namely in a much-copied work, *Christos Pantocrator*. More on that later!

OK, this is all fine and good, but how do I access this, how do I practice to develop this awareness and understanding in my day to day life? Well, one of the basic things is to practice opening our eyes spiritually to look for God—because, well, we need to open our eyes to see the light! In Eucharistic Prayer C it has that great line: “Open our eyes to see your hand at work in the world about us.” And practicing opening our eyes begins with prayer, and then taking that God-vision out into our world to help us see.

Indeed, practicing with eyes and ears opened is what we are called to in our Christian life. As one commentator I read said, “To remain a babe in Christ is a monstrosity. We are meant to grow up in him.”! (Interpreters, John, p.711) And the promise is there as in our gospel this morning—I’ll read it again, changing the gender for God just for the heck of it, and because we all know that God really has no gender, it’s just our limitation of language, and “heavenly parent” just doesn’t have the same ring!

“Those who love me will keep my word, and my Mother will love them and we will come to them and make our home with them. Whoever does not love me does not keep my words; and the word that you hear is not mine, but is from the Mother who sent me. I have said these things to you while I am still with you. But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Mother will send in my name, will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you.”

And then he gives them his peace and tells them he is going away, but will come back to them in the power of the Holy Spirit. So, here is the promise that if we love God and Christ, that they will come with the Holy Spirit, and make their home in us, and teach us, remind us, and continually reveal God to us. The famous painting of Christ knocking at the door is a reminder of how he comes to us first and knocks for the door of our hearts to be opened.

Three years ago on this morning we revealed the icon behind the pulpit: *Christos Pantocrator*, mentioned a little earlier. This is an icon of Christ that emerged very early in the church with various artists making their interpretation of it. The earliest version of it is in the monastery of St. Catherine’s in the desert of the Sinai peninsula. *Pantocrator* is the Greek translation of the Hebrew words *Yahweh*

(YHWH) *Sabaoth*, Lord of Hosts, or Almighty God, which is meant to relay God's majesty and power and can be literally translated 'Ruler of all' or 'Sustainer of all'. I like the notion of Sustainer, because it gets at the mystery of Christ as 'all in all'.

I also like the imagery of icons and what they are supposed to entice you to do. Monks and others who create icons are said not to 'paint' an icon, but rather to 'write' an icon. The understanding being that while they are painting they are deep in prayer and writing a story to call us to prayer in the painting of the image. In this version of Christos Pantocrator, the Bible is opened to the passage of Christ saying "I am the light of the world". I hope that this icon will inspire you to practice seeing Christ in all the world around you, through him, as it were, the light is turned on for us to see. But first we must open our eyes. Like the first convert in Europe, Lydia, we need to cultivate the hunger for God and have our eyes wide open for the light.

The Quakers have a deep appreciation for this spiritual notion of 'light', and one of my favorite Quaker expressions, one they use to say they are praying for someone, is: "I will hold you in the light", which I do for you all everyday!

Let us pray:

Christos Pantocrator, open our eyes to your light that we might see you in all the world around us. May we continually hold ourselves and others in your light. And in the next few moments of silence, help us to nurture our longing for the light and learn to return to that throughout each day. Amen.

Christ the Saviour (Pantokrator), a 6th-century encaustic icon from Saint Catherine's Monastery, Mount Sinai.

