

Prelude: "Life-Giver, Maker, God of All" [VT #139] [Annie Schulz]

Gathering thoughts: [Doug Schulz]

Welcome to this final service in the celebrative Light-of-the-World focused Christian season of Epiphany! And this Sunday also happens to be Valentine's Day. May God fill us with both Light and Love, then, and may we share these gifts from God with generosity as we grow in Grace!

By next Sunday we will have entered the season of Lent which leads us toward Easter. In this strange year of calendar-watching where we can't go anywhere and can't do very much outside of our own homes, may the worship of God week by week be a source of comfort and encouragement, a warm and bright light of God's presence and of our hope in a healthier future with the pandemic behind us one day at last.

But for now we continue to gather not in the church building but as the church alive in our homes. May today's service touch all of our lives with wellness and goodness, as the songs prepared by Annie Schulz for the Grace Singers and the reflection presented by Laurence Steven lead us into a deeper understanding once again about our theme these Epiphany weeks: "*Awake! Arise! God is Calling Now*".

Laur Steven's reflection will focus on how God's call comes to us sometimes like a shaft of light breaking into our seemingly orderly or carefully protected world. God tickles our security with a beam of grace-light that reminds us of who we are, and what God is calling us to be and do. Laur will make reference to the biblical stories about the Old Testament prophets Elijah and Elisha and about those disciples of Jesus who witnessed what we call the "Transfiguration" when they saw a vision of the old prophets coming to bless the Kingdom work of Jesus in his time. Our prayers and songs today will contain some of the images from those inspiring stories.

Pastor Beth and I will co-lead this worship time. We thank Ted Kopp for serving as our sound and recording technician.

I invite you now to contemplate our Call to Worship adapted from a song "We Have Come at Christ's Own Bidding" found in the Voices United hymnbook (#104).

Call to Worship:

O come as Christ bids us to this high and holy place,
where we wait with hope and longing for some token of God's grace.
Let us pray for new assurance that our faith is not in vain,
searching like those first disciples for a sign both clear and plain.

O come let Light break in upon our darkness, let splendour bathe us with the Word.

Let our remembrance of old faithful prophets enlighten as God's voice is heard. Let eyes and hearts behold with wonder how the Scriptures and our spirits meet: Christ, with garments drenched in brightness, stands transfigured and complete.

O come, be strengthened by a glimpse of glory, take courage lest our faith decline. Come, resist Peter's temptation to think it's time to build a shrine.

No, true worship gives us courage to proclaim what we profess, that our daily lives may prove us people of the God we bless.

Prayer:

O Holy God, whose nature, we confess, is full of light so bright it humbles us, we thank you that it also invites us to be encouraged, comforted, guided, and made secure in the awareness that you are real, powerful, pure... and ever-present to us, all along our journey through the seasons and years, and even in the darker times of life. Help us open ourselves to your light today. In Jesus' name we pray. AMEN

Scripture:

II Kings 2:1-12

1 Now when the Lord was about to take Elijah up to heaven by a whirlwind, Elijah and Elisha were on their way from Gilgal. 2 Elijah said to Elisha, "Stay here; for the Lord has sent me as far as Bethel." But Elisha said, "As the Lord lives, and as you yourself live, I will not leave you." So they went down to Bethel. 3 The company of prophets who were in Bethel came out to Elisha, and said to him, "Do you know that today the Lord will take your master away from you?" And he said, "Yes, I know; keep silent."

4 Elijah said to him, "Elisha, stay here; for the Lord has sent me to Jericho." But he said, "As the Lord lives, and as you yourself live, I will not leave you." So they came to Jericho. 5 The company of prophets who were at Jericho drew near to Elisha, and said to him, "Do you know that today the Lord will take your master away from you?" And he answered, "Yes, I know; be silent."

6 Then Elijah said to him, "Stay here; for the Lord has sent me to the Jordan." But he said, "As the Lord lives, and as you yourself live, I will not leave you." So the two of them went on. 7 Fifty men of the company of prophets also went, and stood at some distance from them, as they both were standing by the Jordan. 8 Then Elijah took his mantle and rolled it up, and struck the water; the water was parted to the one side and to the other, until the two of them crossed on dry ground.

9 When they had crossed, Elijah said to Elisha, "Tell me what I may do for you, before I am taken from you." Elisha said, "Please let me inherit a double share of your spirit." 10 He responded, "You have asked a hard thing; yet, if you see me as I am being taken from you, it will be granted you; if not, it will not." 11 As they continued walking and talking, a chariot of fire and horses of fire separated the two of them, and Elijah ascended in a whirlwind into heaven. 12 Elisha kept watching

and crying out, "Father, father! The chariots of Israel and its horsemen!" But when he could no longer see him, he grasped his own clothes and tore them in two pieces.

Hymn: "Longing for Light" [VT #715, vv. 1,2,5]

*Longing for light, we wait in darkness. Longing for truth, we turn to you.
Make us our own, your holy people, light for the world to see.*

*Refrain: Christ, be our light! Shine in our hearts. Shine through the darkness.
Christ, be our light! Shine in your church gathered today.*

*Longing for peace, our world is troubled. Longing for hope, many despair.
Your word alone has pow'r to save us Make us your living voice. [Refrain]*

*Many the gifts, many the people, many the hearts that yearn to belong.
Let us be servants to one another, making your kingdom come. [Refrain]*

Prayers of the People: [Beth Woelk]

For our prayers of the people on this Valentine's Day, I invite you to join me in this *Litany of Hearts* adapted from a prayer by Joyce Rupp.

Christ be our light!
Shine in our hearts.
Shine through the darkness.

Shine your light so that
broken hearts are mended
young hearts stay wonder-filled
old hearts discover their wisdom
embittered hearts let go of hurt
compassionate hearts find strength
and big hearts share their wealth.

Shine your light so that
betrayed hearts recover trust
wounded hearts are comforted
hardened hearts begin to soften
happy hearts announce their joy
and courageous hearts keep on risking.

Shine your light so that
passionate hearts tend flames
arrogant hearts learn humility
sympathetic hearts benefit others

determined hearts loosen their grip
envious hearts accept what they have
and lost hearts find their way home.

Shine your light so that
loving hearts reach out to others
generous hearts receive in return
fearful hearts turn toward trust
empty hearts befriend loneliness
tepid hearts stretch into action
and faithful hearts remain steadfast.

Kindhearted Holy One, you gather all of our hearts into your one great heart. As our hearts are cracked open by the experiences of our lives and the events of our world shine the light of your grace and love to soften and strengthen us. Remind us of the ways that we belong to one another. Remind us when we hesitate or question our ability to share our love with one another that you dwell in our hearts. Remind us that you are our dwelling place. Christ be our light! Shine in your church, empowering us to be servants of one another and to live into these words that you taught us to pray:

“Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name.
Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread.
And forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us.
And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.
For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory, forever and ever.” AMEN

Hymn: “Jesus on the Mountain Peak” [VT #301]

*Jesus on the mountain peak stands alone in glory blazing.
Let us, if we dare to speak, join the saints and angels praising.
Hallelujah!*

*Trembling at his feet we saw Moses and Elijah speaking.
All the prophets and the law shout through them their joyful greeting.
Hallelujah!*

*Swift the cloud of glory came, God proclaiming in its thunder
Jesus as the Son by name! Nations, cry aloud in wonder!
Hallelujah!*

*This is God’s beloved Son! Law and prophets sing before him;
first and last and only One. All creation shall adore him!
Hallelujah!*

Scripture:**Mark 9:2-9****[Laur Steven]**

2 Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and John, and led them up a high mountain apart, by themselves. And he was transfigured before them, 3 and his clothes became dazzling white, such as no one on earth could bleach them. 4 And there appeared to them Elijah with Moses, who were talking with Jesus. 5 Then Peter said to Jesus, “Rabbi, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.” 6 He did not know what to say, for they were terrified. 7 Then a cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud there came a voice, “This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!” 8 Suddenly when they looked around, they saw no one with them any more, but only Jesus.

9 As they were coming down the mountain, he ordered them to tell no one about what they had seen, until after the Son of Man had risen from the dead.

Reflection:**“How the Light Gets In”****[Laur Steven]**

I take my sermon title—How the light gets in—from the refrain to Canadian troubadour Leonard Cohen’s song “Anthem”:

Ring the bells that still can ring
Forget your perfect offering
There is a crack, a crack in everything
That’s how the light gets in.

Though Cohen was at root a practicing Jew, he was also a practitioner of Zen Buddhism, and he had a great admiration for and interest in the figure of Jesus. He’s been called a “trans-religious” person. Perhaps his straddling of a number of faith traditions reflects his sense that any one understanding, held too rigidly and unreflectingly, tends to obscure the cracks in our spiritual stances, cracks which ironically enough, let the light in.

In this 7th Sunday of Epiphany I want to focus on how the stronger our sense of our own worldly security becomes, the harder it is for us to let God in. It is a natural human tendency to see our worldly security as a response from God to our actions. But it’s not. The light of God’s grace is not a reward for our perfect offerings. The light of God’s grace breaks into the world of each of us through the chinks in our armour, the cracks in our well-laid plans. The light being shone into our lives currently through various cultural “cracks” in our normal world gives us the opportunity to recognize, to remember, that we do not own ourselves or the world but are only dwellers, sojourners, resident aliens. I’ll consider a couple of those “current cultural cracks” later on in my sermon.

Before I do, though, I’ll provide some scriptural background and context by looking more closely at our two scripture readings for today. In our Hebrew Scripture from 2 Kings, Elisha follows his mentor and father figure Elijah out of Israel, across

the parted Jordan, into the wilderness. There, in anguish, as his world is cracking apart, Elisha has a vision of “a chariot of fire and horses of fire” taking Elijah up into heaven in a whirlwind. In the face of the light shining into his cracked world, Elisha grasps for a familiar foundation: the power and might of the militarized Israelite nation, crying out "Father, father! The chariots of Israel and its horsemen!" Immediately Elijah and the light disappears, and Elisha is left in the wilderness, tearing his clothes in grief. Our selection today did not include the next two verses, but they are crucial. Elisha picks up Elijah’s mantle and strikes the Jordan with it, screaming “Where now is the Lord, the God of Elijah?”, and the river parts for him to cross, giving him the opportunity to re-enter Israel as the prophet of the Lord, becoming, in effect, the light spilling into fortress Israel through the cracks in its all too human armour.

Our gospel reading today was Mark’s account of the Transfiguration. In certain ways the story is similar to Elisha’s. The disciples follow Jesus into a mountainous wilderness where they witness the brilliant transfiguration of Jesus and his meeting with Elijah and Moses. Terrified and not knowing what is going on, Peter says to Jesus, "Rabbi, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah." Like Elisha reverting to a familiar foundation, here Peter offers to provide dwellings, shelters. Immediately they are shrouded in a cloud, they hear God’s voice telling them to listen to His Beloved Son, and the vision disappears. As they descend the mountain, Jesus orders them to “tell no one about what they ha[ve] seen, until after the Son of Man ha[s] risen from the dead.” The disciples, still very much in the dark about this Jesus person they are following, despite the light they have just witnessed, “kept the matter to themselves, discussing what ‘rising from the dead’ meant.”

Both Elisha and Peter, at the boundaries of their comprehension and in the face of spiritual illumination that pours through the cracks in their worlds, try to shore up those worlds by resorting to traditional understandings of security. Elisha references the power of fortress Israel, and Peter references the human desire for a home, a place of safety to lay our heads. And in both cases they are seen to be missing the point, missing the opportunity provided by the epiphany they’ve experienced. For Elisha, God responds directly to Elisha’s anguished cry, parting the Jordan so he can re-enter Israel with a new understanding. In Peter’s case, despite God speaking directly from the cloud, the fuller understanding of the new direction the disciples need to follow takes longer, and is only fully realized well after the resurrection, at Pentecost, when they assume the mantle of the gospel and undertake to carry its light into a fractured world.

At the outset of this sermon I said I’d refer to two “current cultural cracks” in our business-as-usual world. Here’s the first. I last preached on January 3rd, Epiphany Sunday, and I left the Grace community with an opportunity: to recognize

how the burgeoning Mennonite affiliated Church in the Third World was an epiphany to us in the West—a light-filled crack in our self-sufficiency—offering a chance for us to rejig our thinking about our place in the world, and to act by sharing some of our resources from our reserve fund with the Meserete Kristos College in Ethiopia. Now, you might be thinking that keeping some funds in reserve is simply wise fiscal management, and I agree. But how often have we heard arguments that the rainy day has arrived and we need to use the reserve, only to have them rebuffed by counter arguments saying we can't spend the money because doing so weakens us for worse future events? We need to discern when prudent fiscal management shades over into something else. Jesus helps us do the discerning. Here he is, in this passage from Luke 12:15-21, 34:

Then He said to them, "Beware, and be on your guard against every form of greed; for not even when one has an abundance does his life consist of his possessions." And He told them a parable, saying, "The land of a rich man was very productive. And he began reasoning to himself, saying, 'What shall I do, since I have no place to store my crops?' Then he said, 'This is what I will do: I will tear down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. And I will say to my soul, "Soul, you have many goods laid up for many years to come; take your ease, eat, drink and be merry.'" But God said to him, 'You fool! This very night your soul is required of you; and now who will own what you have prepared?' So is the man who stores up treasure for himself, and is not rich toward God. ... For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also."

The epistle reading for this Sunday, which we did not read, was Paul writing to the Corinthians. He says: "... the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ". Our material self-sufficiency—whether through money or power—could well be called the "god of this world." Yes, of course we all need reasonable food, clothing, and shelter. I am not advocating that we stand on street corners wearing nothing but a sandwich board proclaiming that the 'End of the World is Nigh'. Yet as we just heard Jesus say, "Not even when one has an abundance does his life consist of his possessions." It is so hard for us to remember this, to recognize that our life is not our own, but something given by God, that transcends our material world, and that if we try to enclose our life within a material fortress, to fill all the cracks, we are actually shutting out the light, worshipping an idol who controls our heart, losing our life.

Here is the second "cultural crack." For a year now the world has been struggling with the Covid-19 pandemic, hoping longingly for a vaccine which will help us get back to a version of our normal lives. And then came the vaccines! Now, we think, if we can just get our citizens vaccinated, all will be well. We applaud our government's moves to secure adequate supplies of the vaccines to protect all

Canadians. And then, *crack*, the vaccine companies begin to have supply problems, and we are told we have to wait longer. And then, *crack*, we learn about mutations in the virus that might render their effectiveness problematic. And then, *crack*, we start to hear the calls from the Third World, saying the West must not hoard the vaccines, but must take steps to ensure that all people on the globe are vaccinated.

One of the prominent Third World commentators is the Director of the Africa Centres for Disease Control and Prevention, Dr. John N. Nkengasong, from—wait for it—Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. As I listened to him speak of the pandemic’s effect on Africa as a *global moral* catastrophe, and as I heard him outlining how some wealthy countries are hoarding up to four times the vaccine their populations need, and as I heard him explain how without vaccines the mutating virus will create reservoirs of disease in African countries which will inevitably return to infect the West, yet again—as I heard all these things, the effect on me was of light stabbing into my life through widening cracks in my material world, my fortress Canada. What I recognized in the light, what the light reminded me of, once more, is that our very lives have their foundation and sustenance not in the material world, but in the commands to “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength ... and your neighbour as yourself.” (Mark 12:29-31)

In a sermon I preached here in July 2018 I said, “As Christians ... we are blessed and fortunate because we are called—continuously—to be the church, to become, as the apostle Paul puts it in Eph. 2:22, ‘a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit’.” I want to quote the scriptural context for this statement by Paul. In a sermon in which I’ve called attention to the cracks in our material self-sufficiency, I think it’s important to remind us of the great gift offered to us in the light of Epiphany, and at all times:

19 Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and strangers, but fellow citizens with God’s people and also members of his household, 20 built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. 21 In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. 22 And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit.

I originally ended the sermon at this point, but this morning my dear wife Jan forwarded to me a poem that our dear friend John Rempel had sent her. As I read it, knowing I was preaching today a sermon titled “How the light gets in”, I felt a distinct nudge from the Holy Spirit that this was the way to end that sermon. I think you’ll see why.

For those who want to change the world

Ann Hostetler

Give up perfection for just one day.
Feel yourself a creature of flesh and bone,
walk around in the cold, wind chafing
your face, joints jarring as your worn
soles pound concrete.

Keep walking till you face
your deepest failure – not
with clenched fists, not blinded
by shame, but with a detached
curiosity that opens
to compassion. Finger
the glazed wound tenderly
as you would caress the gash
in Christ's side. Wear it lightly
as God's fingerprints. You see
one doesn't have to travel far
to know suffering, though you
may carry it to the ends of the desert
before you discover it's yours.
Before you discover the light
failure lets into the darkness
of the private soul. Polished
by forgiveness our failures
are the only possible windows
through which to truly see
another human soul.

All else is mirrors
and an endless craving
for reflections of our worthiness.
Remember Christ was wounded
so he could be like you.

And they all said: Amen!

Hymn of Response:

“O God, You Search Me”

[VT #199]

*O God, you search me and you know me.
All my thoughts open to your gaze.
When I walk or lie down you are before me:
ever the maker and keeper of my days.*

*You know my resting and my rising.
You discern my purpose from afar,
and with love everlasting you besiege me:
in e'vry moment of my life or death, you are.*

*Before a word is on my tongue, Lord,
you have known its meaning through and through.
You are with me beyond my understanding:
God of my present, my past, and future, too.*

*Although your Spirit is upon me,
still I search for shelter from your light.
There is nowhere on earth I can escape you:
even the darkness is radiant in your sight.*

*For you created me and shaped me,
gave me life and knit me in the womb.
For the wonder of who I am, I praise you:
safe in your hands, all creation is made new.*

Benediction:

[Doug Schulz]

Go now renewed in the knowledge of your calling to be a servant of God as a follower of Jesus in all the pathways of life. And may the peace of Christ be with you as the light of God's presence surrounds you, guides you, provides for you each day, until we meet again. AMEN

Sending Hymn: "You, Lord, Are Both Lamb and Shepherd" [VT #432, vv.1-3]

*You, Lord, are both Lamb and Shepherd.
You, Lord, are both prince and slave.
You, peace-maker and sword-bringer
of the way you took and gave.
You, the everlasting instant;
you, whom we both scorn and crave.*

*Clothed in light upon the mountain,
stripped of might upon the cross,
shining in eternal glory,
beggar'd by a soldier's toss,
you, the everlasting instant;
you who are both gift and cost.*

*You, who walk each day beside us,
sit in power at God's side.
You, who preach a way that's narrow,
have a love that reaches wide.
You, the everlasting instant;
you, who are our pilgrim guide.*