



SAINT THOMAS CHURCH FIFTH AVENUE
in the City of New York
The Reverend Canon Carl F. Turner, Rector
www.SaintThomasChurch.org

Sunday, February 9, 2020
The Fifth Sunday After The Epiphany

Choral Mattins and Festal Eucharist
at 11:00 a.m.

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A Sermon by
The Reverend Matthew Moretz, *Associate Rector*
on
Isaiah 58:1-12 and Matthew 5:13-20
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Luminary Life

Do you remember the first time you saw a rainbow? The first one I ever saw was on a family trip, I was no more than ten. We were in Appalachia driving through winding roads, and at one part of the road a vista revealed itself one of misty mountains. Now I had seen enough of those at that point in the trip to be unimpressed. But this time, there was a great arch of color planted in the sky. It was misty, too, but bigger than any of the mountains below. Now my Mom didn't stop the car, so I looked at it for as long as I could, before we had to leave that vista behind. What did that rainbow do? Because that rare rainbow shined on my eyes for that brief time, I will always have that moment. What the rainbow illumined became like crystal within my consciousness, a preserving this one moment out of all the other moments that have since fallen into oblivion. The rainbow gave me this gift. I'm sure the same thing has happened to you. You saw a rainbow, and you never forgot about it. And because of that encounter, a part of you is now fixed within, indelibly marked with the sublime.

Light reveals so much of our world to us so we can make our way out there. But there is another light required to illuminate other hidden things, certain deeper paths. Landscapes of meaning. Vistas of truth. Your purpose, your calling must be illuminated by a very special sort of light. Perhaps, like the times you saw a rainbow, you can recall one of those shining moments of your life when everything was arranged just right. And out of that moment a divine light burst forth, from above or below, and in a flash it illuminated the inside of your life, your consciousness, your soul, and after that moment of illumination, your life was forever heightened, as if moving from grayscale to color. You know, if you're standing in a certain place, you can be looking right at the patch of sky where a rainbow could be, and you'll see nothing, but if you walk a bit and stand in the right place, there it will be, all those colors.

Jesus is very interested in this kind of illumination, a light that must shine directly upon seeking hearts, hearts in the right place, in order for God to be ever more glorified on earth. He lamented during his ministry, like the prophet Isaiah did, that people would see but not perceive, hear but not understand. People could see the surface, but couldn't see the inner meaning. Or, even worse, they confused the meaning horribly. For example, Jesus would heal a person, the power of God would be made manifest with such intensity that a person would be delivered from their disease, yet some direct witnesses would completely miss the point. They would be convinced that this was not a divine power but a diabolical one, that Jesus was casting out demons using the power of demons. Their inner sight was such that God's Son could be right in front of them, and they were only able to see God's Enemy.

Like the Psalmist who sang “O taste and see that the Lord is good,” Jesus knows how crucial it is that an inner light must shine so that we can see the divine colors that surround us. He knows how a kind of salt must be on the table of our consciousness so that we can taste all the divine flavors that are hidden on our plate. Without *that* salt and light, and without our tasting and seeing, we are oblivious, or worse.

It was Sir Isaac Newton, the natural philosopher, the mathematician, the alchemist and theologian, who, among many other things, studied light and taught us a lot about how it works. He took prisms of glass, which scattered the light, and he determined that an entire spectrum of color could be found within the relatively white light that coursed from the sun. Paradoxically, what looks like no color at all, is actually comprised of every color. In a way, all the colors are hidden in regular light, until something shifts, or the light hits something and careens off of it, and one part of the light, one color can be perceived by our eyes.

Is that how the inner light shines, sometimes? Something must get in our way, the trajectory of our lives hits some kind of obstacle, it's most likely a disruptive, or even painful time, sparks fly, a shard of glass scatters our spirit. If we survive, out of that moment, if we are brave enough to look upon that vista, a color of life shines out that we had never seen before, a color that we start to see everywhere, as long as we live. And we notice that other people who have gone through the same obstacles, they see that color too. And we now see all these vivid, but hidden, through-lines to hearts that we could never have seen before.

A century after Newton, the statesman, scientist, and poet, Johannes Wolfgang von Goethe, he did some of his own experiments with color. He didn't just use prisms, he looked at light passing through all sorts of hazy fluids in little jars. And he frustrated many people after he became convinced that each color wasn't a part of white light, but that each color was the result of a sort-of battle between light and darkness. For him, darkness wasn't the absence of light, it was a contending force that weakened the light of its power, and that is where the colors came from. For example, the yellow light of the candles on this altar are that way because yellow is a light which has been dampened by darkness. And the blue of the stained glass in the reredos, for Goethe that blue is a darkness that is weakened by light.

Now, no physicist takes Goethe's color wheel seriously anymore, but how could a mystic not be moved by his vision? If this is not how visible color works, perhaps this is just how those invisible colors within works, for our lives are indeed colored by our experiences of light and dark, of good and evil. Every chapter of our life has its own hue, doesn't it?

I invite you to look back at the rest of the reredos, this monumental boundary between earth and heaven. After all this talk of color, you may notice that the largest portion is all gray, light gray, dark gray. But it is still the most impressive part because all that gray stone is carved into the shape of human beings, and not just any human beings, but saints and martyrs, all gathered around Jesus, showing us the lives that they lived for Him. Carrying symbols of their ministry and life's work which they saw through to the end, in some cases fearlessly carrying symbols of their untimely death. All that light-less stone is shining upon us because of the lives they lived. With their lives lived to the hilt for God they became salt and brought out the flavors of the feast that God has given us. By following Christ with their whole lives, they became a light to the world, revealing to our inner eye their true colors, colors with a kind of weight, revealing not only what is possible but what is actual, and because of them, God's mercy and love has become part of history, fixed in reality, as solid as the stone itself.

The prophet Isaiah tried to describe this dynamic energy that comes from lives lived for God: “Then shall thy light break forth as the morning, and thine health shall spring forth speedily: and thy righteousness shall go before thee; the glory of the Lord shall be thy reward.”

The lives the saints lived who are up there, and the lives of the saints we have met along the way in our time, their “righteousness goes before them,” they've all helped us to perceive God's merciful and loving activity

in the world. Because of their lives, a part of us is now indelibly marked with the sublime. God's glory is made visible by their bioluminescence.

We must never be so glamoured by these luminaries, though, that we forget that Jesus calls to us, just as he called to them. And the lives that we live can help others to see God's glory, too. Or, to put it another way, the light that shines from them, can shine from us. This is not hubris; this is just how it works. Nothing that God gives us is ever just ours. If we seek God's glory, and by God's grace find it, there is a mysterious amplification that occurs, because those with eyes to see will see, and then draw strength from that to increase in the spirit in ways that no one can fathom. Indeed, as Jesus said, a city set on a hill cannot be hid. Our faith and hope and love are not meant to be hidden under a bushel, just for ourselves alone, but they are meant to give light to the whole house, light colored by lives truly lived. Whether it is in the saints, or in we who seek to emulate the saints, this light, once it starts shining, it doesn't only have a color that matches our lives, it also has gravity, a sort of attractive force, that draws other lives in for a closer look.

By God's grace, may we magnify the glory of the Lord with these lives of ours. O Lord, set our hearts in all the right places so that your light may shine not merely *on* us, but, like a prism, *through* us, so that this world may be drawn ever closer back to yourself, the beautiful Source of Every Life, Every Love, and Every Light.