

Sermon Preached by The Rev. John S. Nieman  
St. Margaret's Episcopal Church  
January 16, 2022 Epiphany 2/Year C  
Texts – Isaiah 62: 1-5; Psalm 36: 5-10; 1 Corinthians 12: 1-11; John 2: 2-11

One of the first songs I ever learned in church, right after “Jesus Loves Me,” was “This Little Light of Mine.” There are at least two tunes for this. One comes out of the gospel music tradition and is probably more familiar. (“This little light of mine, I’m gonna let it shine....”) I learned the more subtle version when I was three. (“This little gospel light of mine, I’m gonna let it shine....”) Regardless of the version, most kids love the verse that says “Hide it under a bushel...NO! I’m gonna let it shine.

Whatever version we learn, the message is surely simple, yet enduring and profound, even for adults. As Christians, we hold within ourselves something of the light of Christ. Indeed, all people have that light, whether they realize it or not. Remember this part of the baptismal covenant we said last week? “Will you seek and serve Christ in *all* persons, loving your neighbor as yourself?” Sometimes it’s hard to see that light in some people, but it’s there. Part of our call as Disciples of Christ is to let the light inside of us shine, as the song says; not to hide it under a bushel – or anywhere else, for that matter.

I hope you’ve noticed that, during this Season of Epiphany, there are lots of references to the shining light of God. The Epiphany blessing I say at the end of the liturgy has it: “May Christ, the Son of God, be manifest in you, that your lives may be a light to the world.” Isaiah mentions it as part of his message of hope for the returning exiles: God will vindicate Jerusalem, and she “shall shine out like the dawn.” The readings appointed for the Day of Epiphany include this, also from Isaiah, “Nations shall stream to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn.” In every case, the reference is to the light of God, but it’s the light of God visible through God’s people. Something of God is revealed through us.

John the gospel writer takes that conviction to the nth degree as he puts it at the core of his understanding of who Christ is. Christ is the revealer of God. Christ is the true light that enables us to see God. As John says in his magnificent prologue, life itself came into being through him, “and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.” What a powerful image: darkness does not overcome light.

Have you ever noticed what happens when you’re in a completely darkened room, and someone opens the door from a lighted hallway? The light from the hallway comes into the room, enabling you to see. But the darkness from the room does not enter the lighted hallway. I don’t know the physics of all that, but somehow light has an inherent edge over darkness. The light of Christ cannot be extinguished. It can be hidden, covered up, the door can be closed on it. But nothing can overwhelm it.

John’s gospel tells of Jesus revealing that light in the first of what will become seven signs. In fact, many people call the first half of the Gospel of John “The Book of Signs.” Jesus and his mother attend a wedding in Cana of Galilee. Lots of people are there and they’re having a great time. But they run out of wine. Apparently, Episcopalians are not the only ones who consider this a crisis. Mary gets anxious and tries subtly to goad Jesus into showing off with a little miracle. “Show ‘em what you got, son.” Jesus gets annoyed. “Not now, mom. Don’t embarrass me. I’m new at this. Give me a break.”

But Mary knows her son. So she tells the servants “Watch this. Do whatever he tells you.”

Jesus relents and tells the servants to fill the huge stone jars with water. When they draw some water out of the jars and give it to the steward, the steward discovers he is in fact drinking wine. And this is not the cheap stuff that comes out of a Carlo Rossi jug. This is the really fine pinot noir from the Willamette Valley. John ends the story by saying “Jesus did this, the first of his signs...and revealed his glory.” He shined the light, which enabled others to see God. And, to top it all off, he did it at a party.

Paul takes this idea and packages it in a different set of metaphors to help us understand that we, too, have the capacity to reveal God. Paul likes to use the image of the Body to refer to the Church. We’ll hear that next week: “...in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body – Jews or Greeks, slaves or free...,” it doesn’t matter who you are, for we are all part of the same body, the Body of Christ. And, as we hear today from him, there are a variety of spiritual gifts in that Body, manifested in each one of us. Paul names several of them: wisdom, knowledge, prophesy, healing, miracles, speaking in tongues. We could add many more. What is the purpose of those gifts? It is to manifest the Spirit for the common good. To put it a little differently, it is to build up the Body, the Church – not for its own sake, but so that others can see and come to the light.

As I have looked out across this congregation over the past three years, this particular expression of the Body of Christ, I have seen a lot of light. I see a magnificent array of gifts: the gift of hospitality, teaching, service to the poor and needy, care for the sick and lonely, joyful music and worship leadership, financial prowess, skills in fixing things, administration, knowledge of the law, artistry, gardening...I could go on. Sometimes we don’t consider these things “spiritual gifts.” They are just what we do. But they become spiritual gifts when they are brought forward as our offering, when they are allowed to manifest the Spirit for the common good. Then they become part of that brilliant light that enables all to see something of God. Barbara Briggs, your next rector, is one very fortunate priest. She will be coming into a lot of light.

I encourage all of you to look inside yourself. Name the gifts you have. Don’t be bashful. And don’t hide your light under a bushel. Let it shine. Let it shine. Let it shine.