

My dad had heart surgery this past Tuesday at the Heart Center, so I got up early, climbed on my motorcycle and started through the countryside up to Carmel. It was dark outside, but about twenty minutes into my ride, just as I turned east, the sun crested the horizon and the sky exploded with light. Beams of light were hitting the clouds, it looked like ribbons of light curled across the sky. I pulled over to the side of the road to watch, and watching, I had a memory of being 20 years-old and participating in a Bible study in which someone mentioned how people in ancient cultures worshipped a sun god—the Egyptians had Ra, the Romans had Apollo, the ancient Greeks had Helios, the Persians worshipped Mithras. Someone in the group was explaining this and I blurted out how stupid ancient people were to believe in a sun god.

But this past Tuesday morning, seeing the power, the beauty, the majesty of the sun, I understood why the ancients worshipped it. After all, doesn't every religion attach divine qualities to things that are so magnificent God had to be involved. Just last Sunday, Joan and I had corn on the cob for dinner and I told her if I ever leave Quakerism, it will be to start a new religion based on corn on the cob. We'll get together once a week and eat corn on the cob. When you join my corn on the cob church, you'll get your very own set of corn holders, a stick of butter, and a salt shaker. And this is how new religions begin.

I thought about the sun and light and started remembering all these places in the Old Testament, in the Hebrew Scriptures, when God was associated with light. One of the authors of the book of Genesis, we suspect there were several, taught that light was the first thing God created. “The earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters. Then God said, ‘Let there be light’; and there was light. And God saw that the light was good.” (Genesis 1:2-4a)

From creation on, God is associated with light. God appeared to Moses in a bush alight with fire. When God led the Israelites through the wilderness, a pillar of fire lit the night sky and showed them the way. On the few occasions God appeared to someone, they had to turn their heads for the light was too bright. The light of God was not only an indication of God’s presence, it also represented God’s guidance and care. When Job was deep in the midst of suffering, he recalled his earlier life, lamenting. “O that I were as in the months of old, as in the days when God watched over me; when his lamp shone over my head, and by his light I walked through darkness.” (Job 29:2-3)

Whenever we read the Jewish scriptures, we notice two characteristics that denote God’s presence. Height. One ascended to meet God. God was on high. Think Moses and Mt. Sinai. And Light. God shone. God radiated light. And in that light, the people of God lived and moved and had their being. Height and light.

This majestic view of God had the effect of making God seem distant and separate and untouchable. This perception of God still persists in almost every religion. It is most common in those religious movements that emphasize purity and holiness. Of course, if your religion emphasizes purity and holiness, when you fail to be pure and holy, you're in trouble. I was raised with this understanding of God and always felt this oppressive guilt, having been taught that I could never please God, that God was a Mighty King, but never a friend.

One of the great insights of Jesus, one of the reasons we remember Jesus, was that he helped those around him understand the character of God differently. That's why anyone in religion gets remembered—they help us see God and ourselves in a way we hadn't before. So here is Jesus, he is teaching great crowds of people. Matthew 4:25 says, "Great crowds followed Jesus from Galilee, the Decapolis, Jerusalem, Judea, and from beyond the Jordan." Beyond the Jordan. That's an important little phrase. *Beyond the Jordan*. If the Israelites crossed the Jordan to claim the Promised Land in Canaan, those who lived beyond the Jordan were non-Israelites and Jesus was welcoming them, too. Now certainly Jesus wasn't the first Jewish man to welcome Gentiles, but the manner in which he did it was so compelling, we remember it. So great crowds followed him, even those from beyond the Jordan.

Today, that would be like saying Jesus welcomed folks from both sides of the Rio Grande. Think about that the next time you hear someone wanting to build a wall on our southern border. Jesus was never much into walls, and where there were walls, he always found a way to boost people over them. Because that was his nature. He would never have been elected President with an immigration policy like that.

So Jesus was speaking to great crowds. Now let's think about it. What do you have when you have a great crowd? Think about the crowds you've been a part of. Joan and I were at the State Fair last week. That was a great crowd. What kind of people were there? All kinds. So many kinds I couldn't keep track. City folks, country folks. Religious folks, non-religious folks. Men, women. Old, young. Gays, straights. Rich people, poor people. Famous people, common people. White folks, black folks, brown folks. Native-born, immigrants. Folks who bathed, and folks who didn't. That's what Matthew meant when he talked about "great crowds." This isn't a crowd someone cherry-picked or screened. This is the masses. It is all kinds of humanity, its best and its worst. And what does Jesus tell them? "You are the light of the world." Now if you were in that crowd, and you had been taught that God was the light of the world, you would have been scandalized. You would have looked at the masses of people who weren't like you, and would have thought to yourself, "Jesus can't possibly be talking about them. These people aren't like God. God is not in them. There is no way they are the light of the world."

But Jesus *was* talking about them, he was looking at all of them and talking about all of them. It was an expansive insight about God, coupled with a radical understanding of what it meant to be human, and some in the great crowd rejected that idea and vowed to kill him, and others in the great crowd embraced that idea and vowed to follow him.

Those who embraced that idea, those who understood themselves to be the light of the world, let their light shine, and changed the world. Those who take seriously their responsibility to be the light of the world, regardless of their religious tradition, are the people who illumine the world, who light up the world, who transform the world. That is the way it has always been. That is the way it will always be.

Those who reject that idea, those who feel no imperative to be light, those are the people who are happy to wallow in hatred and racism and sexism and all the other “isms” that keep the stature of humanity cruel and low.

So we are presented with a choice. That’s what happens whenever we encounter God. We are presented with a choice. Will we shine light, or will we spread darkness?

In every circumstance, in every situation, this is our choice.

Will I shine light, or will I spread darkness?

Will I bring goodness and kindness and decency to this situation, or will I spread anger, suspicion, and hatred?

In every situation, this is our choice. Light or darkness. Growth or stagnation. Love or hate. Great, embracing crowds or small and bitter factions. In every situation, we have a choice.