

Christmas 1  
Church of the Good Shepherd, Silver City, NM

December 28, 2014  
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## Light

I've lived in or near mountains most of my life. In Ecuador the mountains were all around. My birth city sits in a valley at 9,000 ft. elevation, and a minor rocky peak just to the west of the city tops 15,000. Even when I was a small boy and lived among the Tsachi Indians the mountains were never far away. The only times I missed mountains were when we lived in Indiana and central and south Texas. The Hill Country of Texas just ain't mountains! One of my joys of living in Silver City is to be in the mountains once more.

There is a long tradition in the Christian faith and in many other faith traditions of the world of a spirituality centered on mountains. Climbing the mountain is a metaphor for the spiritual journey, Mountains are places of spiritual insight, revelation, or action. But mountains are also multifaceted experiences, stratified into life zones by elevation, creating rain shadows and micro-climates, and, in the Southwest, isolated as they often are from one another by vast expanses of desert, often biologically extremely diverse. There are plants and insects that live only in the Chiricahua Mountains of Arizona, for instance.

One of the delightful things about mountains is the interplay of mountains and light. It takes a myriad of forms: where the sun or the moon rise over the mountains on a given day or night, how the shadow of the mountain changes the temperature of the air, how the angle of the light to your eyes often has a lot to do with the elevation at which you're standing, or the progressive shadows of the sunset. Throw in clouds and you get a rich kaleidoscope of images, colors and vistas. Light in the mountains is always just beyond one's reach. One can never quite predict, and one can absolutely never control the light. Light is to be noted, experienced, and appreciated for what it is.

In today's Gospel the evangelist sets down the foundations for a series of themes that will resonate throughout the marvelous book of John. One of them is the pre-existent Son of God. He presents as none of the other Gospels, collectively called the Synoptic Gospels, show Jesus as being God incarnate. Instead of starting with a birth narrative, like Matthew and Luke, or with his baptism, as in Mark, John starts at the very beginning. Before Genesis 1:1, that starts with the creation of the world, John starts with God, God the Father and God the Son. Only he doesn't call him "the Son." He calls him "the Logos." Word, utterance, statement—when you hear the words of another you get a glimpse into their soul. The Logos is the great revealer of the Heart of the Speaker: God.

This lays the groundwork for another great theme in the book of John, Light and Darkness. The Evangelist says, "That life was the light of men." The Logos, revealer of the heart of the Father, Shines the light of the truth of the Father's heart into our lives, so that if in Jesus we can come to know the heart of the Father, we come to know in Jesus the nature of ultimate truth. If we come to know the nature of ultimate truth, then we can also come to know the nature of our own reality. So the Logos shines the light of truth two ways: Of God into our lives, and of our lives into our hearts.

Like light in the mountains, the light of Christ is a multifaceted thing. It is not just a moral statement of judgment. (This is the light: Have you been walking in the light or in the darkness?—though that is certainly part of it if you keep reading the chapter.) It talks to us about the nature of our relationship with God. The sun is the source of physical light for our planet, yet the sun is 93 million miles away. The light that we use to see the world around us took over 8 minutes to get here. Of all the bodies in our solar system, the Sun is the least hospitable to human life. The coolest part of the sun is still about 7,800 degrees F. (You can do more than fry an egg at that temperature!) But at the same time, the sun provides the light that reflects off the miniscule water crystals in the snow of a snowbank at my feet, sending a thousand diamond sparkles into the air. The sun provides the light for my apple trees to create wonderful fruit. The sun warms the terrarium where our turtle lives in the front room. We talk about God as transcendent and imminent—God, the wholly Other, the Source of all things and the foundation of existence, Not really any one Thing in the world, yet sustaining all things, and yet present in my heart and in my life, hearing my prayers, concerned with my concerns, and sharing my pain and glories.

The light of God orients us to what really counts. One time when I was a teen I was in the mountains in Ecuador hunting. My friend and I had endured 5 days of drizzling rain and pea-soup fog. The hunting had been abominable. Then one evening the clouds rolled away and we watched the sun set behind us. Before us stood Mt. Antizana, almost 19,000 ft. high. The setting sun's rays penetrated the permanent snows of the mountain setting them aglow. It looked for all the world like someone had turned on a lightbulb inside the mountain. We sat there on the mountainside in awe. All of a sudden all the days of dreary weather didn't matter much. The bad luck in hunting didn't matter either. If this was the only moment we had the whole week the trip would have been worth the effort. Beauty is of eternal value for it reflects the heart of the Creator. In the same way, the light of Christ illumines what is most compelling and important in our lives: truth, justice and peace, and all drawing their inspiration and direction from God's unconditional love. These things make other things pale in comparison: investments, family squabbles, or the offense your spouse caused you yesterday afternoon.

The light of God guides our living. There is a large rodent that lives in the jungles of South America. The English name is "Paca." It weighs in between 20 and 40 lbs., about the size of a beaver. It is strictly nocturnal, with large eyes that gather dim light, it likes water and is an excellent swimmer, and it only comes out under the dark of the moon. It happens to be very tasty to eat, and is hunted frequently. The only way to get one is to wait up for it at night, and it's useless to go out when the moon is up. The light of the sun (or its absence in this case) reflected off the moon, determines this critter's behavior. It's nature is to circulate only under the darkest of skies, and to that it is true. I have noticed of late that if you look deeply into the eyes of another person, unless they are drunk, high or really sick, there is a light that shines in their eyes. It shines to the surface from their innermost dreams and desires, their hopes and ideals. The ideals that are noble and godly are lit by the fire of the light of God. Those that are self-centered, twisted and destructive are distortions of that divine light within. This is the light that orients their behavior. Like the Paca, they really only moves when the light is right. Their words may contradict this light for a hundred reasons, but if you watch their behavior you can begin to see the reflection of that inner light. What is the light in your eyes? How does it reflect the light of God within? How is it true to your innermost deepest self that is called to give itself in love? How does it fire up your spirit to true thought, speech and action?

The light of day is increasing now. The winter solstice is past. The sun is coming up earlier and setting later. Soon the warmth of Spring will again green our mountains. The time is not too far away when I will till the garden and get it ready for Karisse's planting. Jesus is the Light of God in our world. How is your faith lengthening your days, warming your heart, and stirring you to action?