

“...the life was the light of all people”  
Reading from the Old Testament: Psalm 119:29-35  
Reading from the New Testament: John 1:3b-9, 14-18

2020. Who'da thunk it? The dawn of a new decade. Do you realize that in five years Saturday Night Live will be 50 years old? I was a month shy of fifteen when it debuted. It was so fresh, so hip, so in tune with the times, and occasionally it still feels that way. Just two weeks ago, we saw Eddie Murphy reprise a role he debuted 39 years ago, and yet still not shy away from the contentious and timely topics of affordable housing and urban gentrification. Thus, I'll risk being called out as a boomer for drawing your attention to a SNL sketch character from nearly a half-century ago.

Emily Litella, Gilda Radner's bespectacled, sweater wearing grandma turned network news opinionator. “What's all this fuss I keep hearing about violins on TV. Why don't parents want their children to see violins on television? Well, I thought the Leonard Bernstein concerts were just lovely. Now, if they only show violins after 10:00 o'clock at night, the little babies will be asleep and won't learn any music appreciation. They'll end up wanting to play guitar and bongo drums ... and join one of those rock and roll outfits... and they won't

drink milk.” She worked herself up into a frenzy of righteous indignance. Once corrected (*Mrs. Litella, that’s violence on television, not violins*), Emily would say, *Oh, that’s different*. And she’d sheepishly smile at the camera and say, *Never mind*.

It was such an iconic sketch that for a generation, moments of embarrassing comeuppance everywhere were disarmed with a grandmotherly, *Never mind*. Fast forward that half-century, we find ourselves entering a new decade, not to mention an election year, where we as a people seem to regularly match Emily Litella’s righteous indignance but rarely if ever make it to the mea culpa of *Never mind!* We live in a time when indignance is rampant and confession and contrition are rare. We get so rife with rage, but the blue moons keep multiplying without hint of acknowledging our own mistaken idea, error, skewed opinion, ingrained bias, and malignant intolerance. And so, at this intersection of a new year, a new decade, and the celebration of Epiphany, it seems meet and right for us to examine the significance and the incumbent responsibility that comes with the entrance of light into the world, the light revealed in the incarnation of Jesus Christ.

“All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people.”

The life was the light of all people. An important question for us during this season of Epiphany is how this life light, revealed in Jesus, is reflected both in our lives and through our shared life together as a church. As with John, we are never to confuse ourselves with the light as though it is something we create or own. Rather, as John’s purpose was to point to the coming light, our calling is to reflect and witness to this light revealed to us and at work in us through the love of God, the grace of Jesus Christ, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit. If you were here a couple of weeks ago (*you know, way back in 2019*) you may remember how John the Baptist’s father spoke of this. “By the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high will break upon us, to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace.”

Is that the light people see reflected in your life? Is that the light people see shining forth from Christ’s church? The answer to both questions probably lies somewhere on spectrum between yes and no, the

needle bumping back and forth from day to day. There is always good news of good work being done in the light of Jesus Christ.

And yet, at the same time there is a troubling fog obscuring the light of Christ as believers, in the name of Christ, abandon the character of Christ, their witness fueled with venom and defined by anger. Lost is the grace, humility, decency, mercy, compassion, and kindness that marked the life light of Christ. Far too easily we become captive to the loud, insular, and angry fear-mongering voices of blame, resentment, suspicion, intolerance, and rage.

Patriotism isn't a weapon, a cudgel. It is a gratitude for the common good, a celebration of the hospitality we have found in a place and among a diverse people. Somehow, in the ceaseless battles for political and personal advantage, we've lost sense of that. I may be wrong, but it seems that those most enraged by the *media* are those who are most captive to it. Too easily, we are seduced to fury without stepping back to see the world through and in the light of Jesus Christ.

I just don't think the life light of Christ is reflected in the venomous witness of a perpetually angry, self-preservationist,

exclusivist church. For the life of me, I cannot reconcile that to the Jesus I see revealed in the Gospels. And yet, angry, self-preservationist, exclusivism is what comes to mind when much of the world and many of our neighbors hear the words *church* or *Christian*. Of all the things I may be remembered by, I hope it isn't anger. Of course, anger in and of itself is not evil, though it is inevitable. The question is what comes of it. For anger can so quickly shroud the light of Christ in fog.

Oliver Burkeman offered an insightful article, published last year in *The Guardian*, on life in this age of rage. First, he acknowledges that anger is not a new phenomenon. Take road rage. We assume it to be a recent and contemporary threat. Yet, we learn that in 1817, Lord Byron was reported to the police for delivering a “swinging box on the ear” to “a fellow in a carriage, who was impudent to [his] horse”.

Burkeman adds that he certainly remembers life in the early 80s as less frustrating, but,” he says, “that’s surely just because [he] lived a child’s life of leisure, all expenses paid.”

Burkeman continues, “Still, the best data we have suggests that, overall, we are indeed getting angrier. Last year, 22% of respondents

around the world told the Gallup organization they felt angry, a record since the question was first asked in 2006. And something else, even harder to measure, feels like it's different as well: it's as though our anger has curdled, gone rancid. As a society, we seem not to express it and move on, but to stew in it – until, at the extremes, it hardens into violence and hate.” (Oliver Burkeman, *The Guardian*)

While anger itself can evolve into something positive, like women's suffrage or the Civil Rights movement,” by contrast, we've built a world that's extremely good at generating causes for anger, but extremely bad at giving us anything constructive to do with it ... Social media, it almost doesn't need saying, is where this problem reaches its extreme. The algorithms of the attention economy relentlessly expose us to enraging stories and opinions, for the straightforward reason that anger spreads more virally than other emotions – so you're more likely to click, like, share and stay glued to Twitter or Facebook when you're furious.” This is certainly evident in the 24/7 diet of cable news, “but online, the diet of outrage can be customized precisely to include whatever drives you, personally, up the wall. It's not so much that social media platforms are full of bigoted trolls and idiots with

harebrained opinions, but rather that, however many there really are, the platforms are designed to ensure you can't avoid the ones who infuriate you the most." (Oliver Burkeman, *The Guardian*) Or worse, the algorithms drive you deeper into a bias that was already imbalanced.

The fatal flaw of the social media focused life, not to mention the 24/7 brain-rewiring army of cable news opinionators who have become the seemingly permanent houseguests in the homes of far too many retirees, is that they offer little in the way of light to guide us into the path of reconciliation that is the essential purpose of Christ's presence in the world.

Listen, if the time we spend scrolling down the algorithmic rabbit trails tailored to our acknowledged and unacknowledged biases dwarf the time we focus on what it means to live in the light of Christ, we have a problem, a huge, mind-altering, light shrouding, relationship stressing, purpose fogging problem. It's like Charles Marlow heading up the river into the *Heart of Darkness* (For boomers, that would be *Captain Benjamin Willard headed up the Nung River*). We, too, then wind up with darkened spirits perpetually shouting, "*The horror. The horror,*" to anyone who'll listen. I have seen families fractured and

friendships broken by this. Cancelled essentially. All lines and wireless networks disconnected. What the pilots used to call radio silence. To what end? Does feeling superior or being *all-eat-up* with animosity such a pleasurable way of life?

It does not have to be this way. “What has come into being in Christ was life, and the life was the light of all people ... The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it ... The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world.”

The most important question you can ask yourself each morning is this: What does it mean and what shall it look like today to walk in the light of Christ? The light of mercy. The light of compassion. The light of generosity. The light of hospitality. The light at the intersection of justice and love where reconciliation is born. If your anger is not helping you get there, you’re going in the wrong direction. If you are not in some fashion participating in the healing of the world, there’s a good chance you’re contributing to its hurt. Try walking in the light. It’s warm there. In the light you are less likely to stumble and more likely to discover a strength and purpose you didn’t realize were within you; and who knows, in the light you may just be surprised by hope.

“From the beginning, Olivia always got sicker than the other babies; she caught colds that wouldn’t leave, which led to coughs that sounded like those of an obese alcoholic smoker,” certainly not something you expect to hear coming out of a two-year old. It wasn’t long before author Ann Lamott’s young friend was diagnosed with cystic fibrosis. Ann and Olivia have a special bond. Lamott says, “she and I sit together in her room and eat chocolate, and I tell her that in a very long time when we both go to heaven, we should try to get chairs next to each other, close to the dessert table.” Olivia agrees, “Yes, more chocolate!”

Olivia’s family has a tribe of good friends, but right after the diagnosis they were almost too stunned to cry. They wanted to help, but as is so common, felt immobilized by shock and sadness. But after a while, Lamott says the image of an Amish barn raising came to mind, and she realized that the people who loved Olivia and her family could build a marvelous barn of sorts around the family. So they did. She says, “We showed up and sometimes we cleaned, we listened, some of us gave massages, some of us took care of the children, and we walked their dog and we cried and then made them laugh; we gave them a lot of

privacy and we showed up and listened and let them cry ... and then took them for hikes. We took the kids to the park. We took the mother to the movies.”

Lamott also says they let the parents hate what was going on when they needed to. She says, “Sometimes we let them resist finding any meaning or solace in anything that had to do with their daughter’s diagnosis, and this was one of the hardest things to do – to stop trying to make things come out better than they were. We let them spew when they needed to; we offered the gift of no comfort when there being no comfort was where they had landed. Then we shopped for groceries.”

*(Anne Lamott, *Traveling Mercies*)* That’s how they built the Amish barn. When the storms come, they’ll have shelter, but regardless of the weather, don’t you know that barn will gloriously shine, having been built in the life light of Christ.

You want to break through the thick fog of anger? Build a barn.  
Share the light. Amen.