

Wednesday January 8, 2014

I had a different column written for this day's mailing. But it felt rather bleak – perhaps because the man who's been my longest continuous friend, for almost 60 years, had died while I was preparing it. So I'm borrowing some words from another friend and mentor, Alan Reynolds.

Light in the darkness

By Alan Reynolds

Ever since human beings have been religious -- and they've evidently been religious ever since they've been human -- light and darkness have had a symbolic and religious meaning.

Perhaps it began when our ancient ancestors learned to use and control fire, and found that instead of huddling all night in the cold and the dark, a small fire offered a source of warmth and light, of comfort and security.

So light became associated with all that is life-giving and good, and darkness with death and evil.

In northern climes, the winter solstice became a time, not of despair, but of celebration. People discovered that in late December, at the very time when nights were longest and darkness seemed to be spreading and conquering the light, days were actually beginning to lengthen, and light again began its long slow march to overcome the darkness.

So it was appropriate that, in a dark time in a desolate country, the birth of Jesus signalled the eternal hope of the eventual triumph of good, whatever the current state of human history.

Not created

The symbolism of light and darkness ("dualism," we call it) is common to all world religions. But the Christian gospel emphasizes the hope; as John's gospel (1:5) says, *"The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has never overcome it."*

In the Bible story, light was the first of God's creations. "*In the beginning... darkness was over the face of the Deep. . . . And God said, 'Let there be light!'*"

Note that God did not create the darkness. It was just there. Similarly, I believe, God did not create death. God's will is life. That is something that

seems to me fundamental to the Gospel: *"In Him is life, and that life is the light of all peoples"* (John 1:4).

We are called to be instruments of that light. We are not the source of the light. The light comes through us, but not from us.

Darkness cannot overcome

All the darkness in the world cannot extinguish the smallest flame.

Walk into a dark room. Flick the switch. The light comes on and the darkness retreats like a frightened puppy to the shadowy corners and under the chesterfield. Extinguish the light, and the darkness will return. But the darkness cannot extinguish the light.

Is it pushing the analogy too far to assert that death is not an active agent that can extinguish life? Death is the absence of life, the passive shadow that creeps back when the light of life has been extinguished.

We live in a time when darkness seems to increasingly envelop the world. Many things we counted as life-giving and good seem weakened or darkened. The people we thought fit to be respected have proven to have feet of clay. The forces of evil seem to be growing ever stronger.

Yet in the end, it is darkness which must fear the light.

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YOUR TURN

The story about the little Christmas tree in my front hall apparently touched your hearts.

Rafael Vallejo posted it to his on-line prayer community. Vic Sedo told me he had a tree exactly like it. And Robert Caughell assured me his mother has one exactly like it too. Only "Hers still has all its coloured plastic plugs."

John Clinton took along a similar tree when he and his wife moved to a new home, two Christmases ago: "My wife has a ceramic tree like that. It's over 60 years old & has come through the family tree (not the Christmas tree!). As she was putting it on the sideboard this year, I heard her talking to the ceramic

tree. THAT tree might even have spoken back to her. Likewise with some of those very old and very fragile ornaments on our tree. Each one has a history and many have a person's name attached to them. ('Judy gave me this, etc.')

"You wrote:. 'But her little ceramic tree still shines in the darkness of our front hall. As long as I have that tree, she too still shines in my memories.' Along with the real reason for the season (the baby in the manger), it is these memories that light the fire in the fire place of Christmas. Our ceramic tree still shines brightly – just like our old 'bubble tree' did for so many years. That's another parallel to your ceramic tree. That bubble tree was one of the ugliest trees I've ever seen. Its beauty was in those very old & very fragile bubble lights. For years & years we nursed them back to be shining lights. It just went on and on and on – year after year after year-- just like the every coming of the baby Jesus into our lives."

Isabel Gibson wondered, "whether Lorraine could have guessed that her words to you, more than 30 years ago, would reach out and touch others?"

Isabel quoted Lorraine's words: "You know, when you talk to me that way, you almost shine." To which she added, "I hope that Lorraine will help me shine for someone, today."

Valentina Gal wrote, "I'm touched by this story and I can't really say why. As I read it, this thought popped into my mind: 'Long after that tree is gone, it will shine in Jim's heart.' Your message reminds me of just how important people like Lorraine are in our growth and development, particularly those who don't think like we do. I find that the teachers and preachers who have challenged my thinking and caused me to read and explore are the ones who help me the most."

Sandra Merrifield sent along a link to a "wonderfully simple Christmas message" from David Roach "minister for Pilgrim Presbyterian Church here in San Antonio, Texas": <http://pilgrimpc.tripod.com/down-in-front.html>

Laurna Tallman understood the difficulties of dealing with a person like Lorraine: "How many Lorraines have I listened to, trying to fathom the mindset that cannot bridge meaning in the scriptures with contemporary knowledge? Not that all contemporary scholarship has had much of a handle on truth! Reconciliation with the truth in ancient knowledge should be an essential condition of new discoveries. But the mindless application of words and Words

is fruitless; genuine communication — the exchange of knowledge, every part of which is a hard-won treasure that may be offered as a gift — cannot proceed. And why? Because one or both of the speakers is not capable of receiving. And yet, she witnessed to her beliefs with a sincerity you acknowledge and you (and, no less, Joan) offered the gifts of yourselves in a sacrifice of listening she needed.”

Charles Hill commented, “Deity must laugh her/his/its head off at our attempts to understand instead of just relaxing and leaving the world a better place – as you did for Lorraine and she for you.”

Charlene Fairchild “Thought I'd come and ‘shine’ in your inbox. A blessed Christmas to you and Joan.”

PSALM PARAPHRASES

On the assumption that you’re celebrating this coming Sunday as the Sunday for New Year’s Day, I’m providing a paraphrase for Psalm 8. The opening words are an exclamation,, as well as an affirmation.

My God, my God! How amazing you are.

I would describe you in terms of the stars or the skies,
the forest or the farthest reaches of the universe,
But they are your creation, and you are their creator.
You are all creation.
Our weapons, our bombs, our power to destroy, dwindle into insignificance
compared to the cry of a newborn baby.

On a starry night, with your glory sprinkled across the skies,
I stare into the infinite ends of your universe, and I wonder,
Who am I?
Why do I matter?
Why do you care about me?

We humans are less than specks of dust in your universe,
our timeframe shorter than a second in the great clock of creation;
Yet you have adopted us.
You have given us a special place in the your family;
you have trusted us to manage your earth, on your behalf --
to look after not just the sheep and the oxen, but also the wolves that prey on them;

To care for the birds, the fish, and even creatures we have never seen at the bottom of the sea.

My God, my God! How amazing you are!

For paraphrases of most of the psalms used by the RCL, you can order my book *Everyday Psalms* from Wood Lake Publications, info@woodlake.com.

YOU SCRATCH MY BACK...

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For other web links worth pursuing, try

- Ralph Milton's HymnSight webpage, <http://www.hymnsight.ca>, with a vast gallery of photos you can use to enhance the appearance of the visual images you project for liturgical use (prayers, responses, hymn verses, etc.)
- David Keating's "SeemslkeGod" page, www.seemslkegod.org;
- Isobel Gibson's thoughtful and well-written blog, www.traditionaliconoclast.com
- Alan Reynold's weekly musings, punningly titled "Reynolds Rap," write reynoldsrap@shaw.ca
- Wayne Irwin's "Churchweb Canada," an inexpensive service for any congregation wanting to develop a web presence, with free consultation. <http://www.churchwebcanada.ca>
- Alva Wood's satiric stories about incompetent bureaucrats and prejudiced attitudes in a small town are not particularly religious, but they are fun; write alvawood@gmail.com to get onto her mailing list.

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I write a second column each Sunday called Sharp Edges, which tends to be somewhat more cutting about social and justice issues. To sign up for Sharp Edges, write to me directly, at jimt@quixotic.ca, or send a note to sharpedges-subscribe@quixotic.ca
