

Light from Light
Light Before the Sun
Gen. 1: 3-5, 14-16; Rev. 21: 22-25

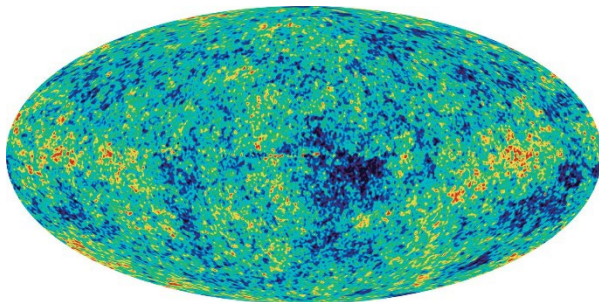
**First Presbyterian Church
Baton Rouge, Louisiana**

**1st Sunday of Advent, Nov. 26, 2023
Gerrit Scott Dawson**

Our theme for Advent this year is light. As the year fades, the darkness falls earlier and earlier. Gone are the long evenings on summer nights. Now it feels like 6:30 is the middle of the night. It's no wonder Christ's people set the celebration of his birth to be at the dark of the year. When the nights are longest, we yearn for the bright flame of hope to dispel all the gloom. Every Advent, then, we re-enter the eager expectation for the Light of the world to arrive. We remember that he came to us once 2000 years ago. We declare our faith that he will come again.

As creatures who dwell on the earth, we know we are dependent on the sun. We exist in a solar system. Everything about life on the earth orients to the star around which we revolve. The sun lights the day when our part of the world turns toward it. Night falls and temperatures cool when our part of the world turns from the sun. Seasons change depending on how the earth is angled toward the sun. Plants turn sunlight into food. We see by the sun's light and ourselves wither without the vitamin D of sunlight. It's almost impossible for us to conceive of life before or after our utter dependence on the sun.

So it's startling to realize that our Scriptures this morning describe a time when there was light but no sun. On the first day of creation. God says "Let there be light." And there was light. But then it's not until day four that God creates the sun and stars. Wait. How can there be light without the sun?

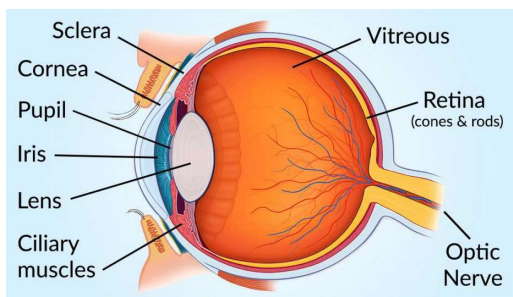


That's actually a very contemporary scientific idea! Astrophysicists call it the Cosmic Microwave Background. This is light in waves too long for our unaided eyes to see. It's ancient light that filled the cosmos long before stars ever formed. This microwave light is still travelling and when scientists detect and map it, they're looking way back in time. All the way to light before the sun. It's a scientific thing.

But the reality of light before the sun also has deep *spiritual* implications. This affirmation is actually defiant, revolutionary and shot through with hope. This truth, when grasped, makes rulers tremble and the oppressed rise up in freedom. It cracks open the dull, tedious, enslaving sameness of life in this world the way it is. All this autumn, our women's Bible study has been studying the book of Ecclesiastes. As you know, Ecclesiastes reveals the great sense of futility that accompanies daily life. We're born, we work, we suffer, we die. Everything else is just chasing after wind. Because, this little book tells us, "There is nothing new under the sun" (Ecc. 1: 9). It appears that the earth remains the same. The cycle of birth, toil and death just keeps repeating. Those who wield power want us to think this is the way it always has been and always will be. Ecclesiastes gives a true picture of how things *appear* to be. But the fuller view of Scripture reveals that the way things are is not the way they have always been. There was light before the sun.

And that means, we have hope that the way things are is profoundly *not* the way things will always be. Change can come. Change will come. There was light before the sun and there will be light after the sun. A new world is coming. Our passage from Revelation describes the new earth, the new city of God, as a place where the sun is no longer needed. Because the glory of the Lord will be our light. God will dwell again in the midst of his people and his own glorious presence will be the light by which we see, by which we live. Do you see where this leads?

We have a word for those who strut about thinking they own the world and own our lives. "Do what you will to me in this world. You do not have the last word. I may have to toil for you, but I am no one's slave. This world, these few years of toil and sorrow in the earth are bounded by light that is brighter than the sun, by life that transcends death, by love that is stronger than hate. In God, I am free." So the Cosmic Microwave Background illustrates the reality of light before the sun. Spiritually, it confirms the Scriptures which tell us how God frees us from the tyranny that we are caught in an endless cycle of futility.



How do we come to realize this freedom? Let's think for a moment about the very fact that we can see at all. In the daytime, sunlight fills the part of the earth where we are. That light reflects off of objects. Our pupils allow more or less of that reflected light into our eye, passing through the lens. The lens focusses that reflected light onto the optic nerve. The optic nerve sends the image to the brain

for interpretation. We see. All of this happens continually and at nearly the speed of light. This is a rudimentary way to name the steps involved in the ordinary, everyday experience of the extraordinary miracle of sight. By sight, by receiving and interpreting light, we perceive the world. That such a complex, interconnected organ as the eye could develop without guidance or design exceeds my rational intelligence and even my fantastic imagination. My mind as well as my heart tell me that light is the gift of a Creator. And sight is the gift of a Creator who allows us to perceive and interpret by that light. For the 96% of us who can see without severe impairment, we give great thanks.

But let's think more deeply about the fact that God gave us sight. He gave us ability to sense and interpret a certain amount of the light that exists in the universe. Unaided, we can't see infrared or ultraviolet light. Fine, there's more light than we can see. But what we can see opens us to experience enough of the world to keep us curious. Sight inspires the awe of beauty. It reveals threat. It awakens desire. It deepens love through all our years. It makes us aware of life and eager to savor life.

What kind of God would give his creatures sight? What kind of personality does it take to let people see from their own perspective? This is a God who is not threatened by our having a real existence. This is a God who loves us enough to let us, on our own, see something of the universe he has made. This is a God who hopes to inspire us to love him for what we see. But he does not force the sight of him onto our eyeballs. He risks that seeing his creation in all its splendor, we might fail to notice our Creator who remains beyond sight.

Maybe we can understand the significance of sight by contrast. Think of scary movies you have seen, or maybe the scary life you have lived, under the power of an abuser and a controller. In the movies, the evil abuser keeps people locked in a windowless room under the ground. In life, dominators want to control everything someone sees and does. They monitor our every move. They check to see what we have looked at on our phones. They track where we go. They don't want us going anywhere that's not pre-approved. They fear that we will see something that tells us there is more to the world than the suffocating, all controlling power of their dominance. The less you see, the less you hope, the less you think there is anything more than what the controller says there is. This can be a spouse or a government, a boss or a media outlet, a helicopter parent or a guilt slinging elder. Free sight is a threat to those who want to dominate.

But domination is not the character of the God described in Scripture! Our God gave us eyes to behold the beauty of the world. To see from within our own lives. To have our own perspective. Limited, yes. But uniquely ours nonetheless. He gave us a real existence.

Now see what follows from realizing the glorious love and freedom in the gift of human sight. We can press into this God without fear. We can move towards God like a plant turning toward the sun for life. We can trust that God is not another dominator and suffocater and user. No, the God who gave us sight wants to give us more sight. He wants us to see the eternity of light before and after the sun, and to know that this eternity is shot through with the light of his love.

God gave us our own lives. We have a real existence. We can live without talking to him or thinking about him. But. But, we cannot flourish without him. We cannot on our own escape the futility described by Ecclesiastes. The cycle of birth, toil, suffering and death is our lot. We cannot find the deep sense of presence and connection for which we long. We have a real life, but we also depend on God for the meaning of that life. For the love, forgiveness, and purpose that we lack. We depend on God for life beyond this world.

God gives us room and time to turn to him freely and ask him to open the eyes of our hearts to see the light of his eternal love. This is the theme of Psalm 36. Listen for the mention of light:

How precious is your steadfast love, O God!
For with you is the fountain of life;
in your light do we see light.
Oh, continue your steadfast love to those who know you.

There is the way to greater sight. A way to find escape from the futility of life under the sun. A way to find inner freedom even from the worst dominators. LORD God, by your light, let me see light. Give me to drink from the river of your delights. Continue to shine your steadfast love on me. Without your uncreated light, I cannot see more than what is in front of me. But by your light, the light of your Spirit, I can see that at the center of the universe, there beats a heart of love.

Let's turn this one more way before we close. The Bible begins by declaring that there was light before the sun. The Bible closes by affirming that in the new Jerusalem, the sun will no longer be needed, for the glory of God will be our light.

Right near the center of the Bible, we see a promise that lights up these present moments. From Isaiah 60,

The LORD will be your everlasting light.
And your God will be your glory.
Your sun shall no more go down,
Nor your moon withdraw itself.
For the LORD will be your everlasting light.
And the days of your mourning will be ended.

The way things are is not how they have always been. There was light before the sun. The way things are is not how they always will be. There will be light after the sun. And so right now comes the liberating truth. The LORD is your everlasting light. He gave you sight and senses so you can have a real existence and truly perceive this world. He longs to give you spiritual light so you can see, in your heart of hearts, his everlasting love and know him as your loving God. In the coming weeks, we will see how God's eternal light entered the world in Jesus. But for now, just claim the truth and make it a prayer: O God, by your light, may we see light. Light eternal. The light of love.