

Catch Fire

2 Corinthians 4: 3-6

First Presbyterian Church
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1. Light from Beyond. We have a friend who got to carry the Olympic torch for a few minutes on its way to Salt Lake City. She remembers the awe of being a light bearer. The thrill of being part of an unbroken chain. The connectedness of being part of something so much bigger. The transcendence of partaking of a spiritual light even as she held the physical torch. That got me thinking about how the

Olympic torch got started and what it meant to the ancients.

In Greek myth, Prometheus steals fire from the gods and gives it to humanity. The fire symbolizes the light of consciousness, creativity, technology and prowess. This myth enshrines the idea of a divine spark in humanity. We recognize that there is a light of life in all of us that comes from a heavenly, or spiritual realm.

So the Greeks often lit sacred fires, including at their athletic contests. In the modern games, the torch is lit from a fire kindled on the site of an ancient temple at Olympia. It's then passed by relay through thousands of people to the site of the games. Sometimes, the flame has been passed to an underwater torch. Sometimes it has flown in lanterns on a plane. So far, it has never failed to make it. The divine spark spreads throughout the world, symbolizing unity, life and peace.

As Christians, we share joy in this symbolic connection of fire and the light of life. But we don't believe divine fire needs to be stolen from reluctant gods. Rather, we believe the God who created physical light, freely shares his spiritual light with those who open themselves to him. Our Scripture takes us to the moment when the light of faith is lit within us. We come alive as if rising from the dead. We see the glory of God as never before. We get changed.



2. Aphantasia: Smoke in the Mind.

But why do we need spiritual light to begin with? Why do people need enlightening? As Christians, we believe that every person has been created in the image of God. There is indeed a spark of the Creator in us. Yet, that light within us has become darkened. We can't see who God is.

We can't understand the meaning of our own existence. Nor our purpose for living. We can dream of eternal life, but we are unable to overcome our mortality. We don't have life in ourselves. We continually fail to live in the light we do have. That's the sober assessment of the human predicament.

In our passage this morning, Paul goes even further. He notes the scary reality of those who do not see who God is nor have light to connect with him. "The god of this world has blinded the minds of those without faith, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel..." Our natural state is spiritual darkness. And there is a malevolent power pumping out that darkness all around us. Paul uses a Greek word that means "blowing smoke to cause spiritual blindness." Someone is clouding our vision so we cannot grasp with our minds the truth of the God who made us and loves us.

Curiously, there's a physical condition called *aphantasia* to describe people who cannot form images in their minds. As many as 1% of folks can see with their eyes, but they cannot see with the mind's eye. They recognize their family when they see them with their eyes, but they can't call up their loved one's faces in their minds.¹ They know their homes, but away from the house, they cannot picture it.

What Scripture tells us is that 100% of human beings naturally have spiritual *aphantasia*. Unaided, we cannot grasp who God is. Specifically, we cannot see that Jesus is the very image, the picture of God. We listen to his words, consider the events of his life, overhear his prayers, but do not get who he is. We do not see that if God is this way, like this Jesus, everything about my priorities changes. Everything about reality changes.

On our own, our spiritual aphantasia means we don't see in Jesus the heavenly light shining. The god of this age blinds the spiritual light of humanity. By blowing the smoke of delusion into our minds. Look, it says, humanity is the

top of the evolutionary heap. There's nothing higher than us. *Whoosh*. Look, you belong to no one and nothing but yourself. Live for yourself to have real life. *Whoosh*. You make up your own reality. Be authentic to whatever you desire. *Whoosh*. Look, you can have it all. This world is enough. You can take all you need. *Whoosh*, don't think about what happens when you die. You only live once. The smoke gets in our minds. We do not see reality.



3. God Shines Light in Our Hearts. Of course, the problem with living under the smoke and spell of an illusion is that it always lets us down. The more we live for ourselves, grasping at our autonomy, fearful to give our lives to the God who made us, the more we sink into darkness. As a culture, we are more afflicted than ever with spiritual malaise. Pervasive depression. Hopelessness. We

resonate so well with the psalmist who said,

If I make my bed in the land of the dead...
If I say, "Surely the darkness shall cover me,
and the light about me be night..."

We do say that, don't we? Mom always said, "You made your bed, now lie in it." There's a lot of deathliness in our lives. Distractions. Compromises. Deceits. Eating up people like food for our consumption. We're wrapped in cynicism and sarcasm. We lie down at night and we feel like Scrooge looking at his own grave. Is this what it has come to? Even in the morning, it seems we just can't find light in our lives. Everything inside us is going dark. That's where being me on my own always leads.

But then the psalmist discovers there is a greater reality than all the thick dark smoke the enemy blows into us.

Even the darkness is not dark to you;
the night is bright as the day,
for darkness is as light with you. Psalm 139: 8, 11-12.

Our God sees in the dark. We may wrap ourselves in blankets of thick darkness and figure we can never find our way back to the light. But God is not daunted. He has plumbed the depth of darkness with unquenchable light. And he shines us in it.

Listen again to what Paul says. “For God, who said, ‘Let light shine out of darkness,’ has shone in our hearts to give the light...” It’s staggering to take in the power of this declaration. God created the universe out of nothing. He spoke light into being. It takes a similar act of creation to light up our dark hearts. To open our blind eyes. He speaks. He recreates us. The same power that created the cosmos brings us from spiritual death to spiritual life.

Paul explains further, God shines in our hearts to “give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.” On my own, I cannot see who Jesus is. He’s just another historical teacher of faith. An impossible example to follow. A great guy that people made up a lot of stuff about. Someone people use to justify all sorts of evil under the guise of piety. But when God shines light in my heart, suddenly I see: Jesus reveals God to me. Because Jesus is the Son of God come to earth. He is the glory of God shining in a human face. This changes everything.

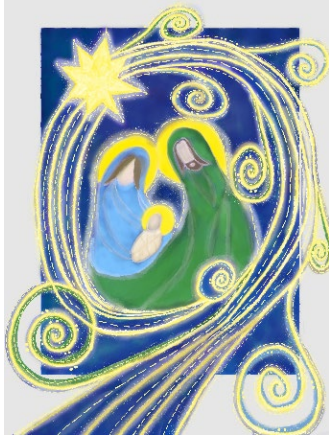


4. Catch Fire with Faith. So how do I get there? What if I feel like there must be more than this darkness I live in, but I can’t quite see all Paul sees in Jesus? How do I catch fire in my faith? There’s a wonderful line in Psalm 43. “Send out your light and your truth. Let them lead me” (Ps. 43: 3). It’s so simple. I’m in the dark. I believe there may be a light. I may

even see a glimmer of that light. How can I get more? Pray this, daily, hourly. “Send out your light and your truth. Let them lead me.” Oh God, by your light alone can I see light. So, please, send light. I don’t have enough light in myself. Send out your light and your truth. I can’t find the way on my own. Let them lead me.

I love the painting called “Christ the Light of the World” by William Holman Hunt. We have a stained-glass window of this in our chapel. Jesus has arrived at a cottage at night. His uncreated light glows behind him. Vines and weeds have overgrown the door of the cottage. But Jesus knocks. He holds in his other hand a lantern that he wants to bring into that dark house. He knocks softly and waits. Astute viewers of the painting soon discover the deep significance of the scene. There is no door handle on the outside. The only latch is inside. The light of the world waits at the dark door. He waits for us to open the door of our hearts

from the inside. “Send out your light and your truth,” we pray. He answers. He arrives at the door. He knocks. He speaks, “Open to me. I have come with light. Turn the latch.”



5. Behold the Glory. Last week one of our deacons, Vince Gilcrease, sent me this luminous painting of the nativity. It fits so well with our advent theme of light. His daughter Amelia painted it. St. Joseph’s Academy chose it to be the Christmas card for this year. That’s pretty wonderful in itself. But even more so, this is the verse on which Amelia based her painting. It’s printed inside the card. Jesus says, “I have come as a light into the world.” The verse continues, “So that whoever believes in me may not remain in darkness (Jn. 12: 46).

This is such a perfect emblem to sum up our whole advent series on light. Here is the old familiar scene: Mary, Joseph and the baby Jesus in her arms. But it’s also different. The scene is charged with light. The deep darkness of Christmas night is not the darkness of death or depression or emptiness. It’s a darkness that is beautiful in its depth, for the dark night is the backdrop for the splendor of light. Uncreated light enters the world in Jesus. And so the skies light up with angel fire. The star of Bethlehem shines over the scene. The light of God pours into the world as if on a road from heaven. Eternity enters the earth and lights it up.

Do you feel the Spirit kindling such a light in your heart? Do you feel the inklings of desire to see the glory of God shining in the face of the Christ child? Fan the spark into the flame of faith. Pray, “Send out your light and your truth, let them lead me.” Catch fire from the torch of faith passed down from the shepherds and the wise men, from the disciples and the martyrs, passed down the generations to this day. The fire has never gone out. It’s the news that a heavenly light entered our world in Jesus Christ. God has lit the fire of his love in the face of Christ. He is lighting that fire in your heart now. Catch fire by faith! You don’t have to remain in the dark. Open the door, for the first time, maybe just a crack. Or maybe wider for the first time in a long time. Pray as sincerely as you can, “Send out your light and your truth, let them lead me!”

¹ <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/when-the-minds-eye-is-blind1/>