Letting Our Light Shine
A Homily for the 5th Sunday after Epiphany
Using Material from the Proclaim Homily Resource
Preached by the Rev. Dr. Brian K. Wilbert
February 9, 2020 - St. Paul’s Church, Cleveland Heights

Let us pray: Through the written word, and the spoken word, may we know Christ to be God’s Living Word and the Light of the World.

I love the Epiphany blessing we are using here at St. Paul’s this season: May Christ’s God’s holy one be manifest in you that your lives may be a light to the world. This speaks to an old tradition observed in some churches of giving a newly baptized person a lighted candle, accompanied by some of the words from today’s gospel: “Let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.” It’s great theology with some fairly obvious symbolism. However, in SOME churches, supposedly for safety reasons, the candle is given to the newly baptized without being lighted. That throws a bit of a wrench in the symbolism doesn’t it.

If we count ourselves among Jesus disciples and think seriously about his statement to us that “You are the light of the world,” we might wonder if we’re going to be left in a position like that of the person standing at the front of the church with an unlit candle. Jesus’ words are addressed to all of his disciples — the “you” here is plural — but they say something about each individual Christian. In some way, each one of us is to be part of a figurative light that provides discernment and guidance and wisdom for the world, a light that keeps the world from just stumbling around in the dark. And we well may wonder how we can do that. After all, we need discernment and wisdom and guidance ourselves. We need someone to give us light!

Exactly! It’s just like the situation with that newly baptized person who has to be given not a bare candle, but a lighted one. We have to receive the light in order to be the light. Fortunately, we don’t have to look very far in Holy Scripture to be told the source of the light that is given to us. If we turn from Matthew’s gospel to John’s, we find, in the eighth chapter, Jesus saying “I am the light of the world.” Not “you” this time, but “I.” Jesus himself is the light. And it’s significant that in the baptismal ceremony, the candle for the newly baptized person is lighted from a larger candle, the paschal candle that represents the light of Christ. If I hadn’t made it clear: Jesus Christ is our light.

A little more searching of the scriptures will turn up a lot of references to light — physical light, of course, but also light used as a metaphor, as in our Gospel text today. It’s a prominent theme in the scriptures. One especially essential passage for these Sundays after Epiphany is in the 49th chapter of Isaiah in one of the songs about the servant of the Lord: “I will give you as a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth.” God is the one who sends his servant to be light for the world.

Studying all these biblical uses of light imagery — and there are many more — can be very interesting. We could look at the ways in which the image is used in different places in the Bible and the connections between one text and another. But instead of going in that direction, we really ought to return to our text from the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew. We would be missing the point of Jesus’ words if we were just to use them to start an interesting study of the theme of light in the Bible.

If we really believe in Jesus, then we are, he says, light. We are light because in baptism and in our nurture through the community called the Christian Church we have received the light of Christ. But Jesus doesn’t just tell us we are light, Jesus then commands us: Don’t hide your light under a basket. “Let your light shine before others.” The light is not really the light of the
world if it’s hidden from the world.

Now, I hope I won’t offend anyone if I suggest that Episcopalians don’t really want to let our lights shine. Well, maybe, a small and appropriate light. Maybe. And, most Episcopalians really don’t respond well to someone backing us into a corner and insisting on telling us about God’s kingdom. Most of us aren’t anxious to shout our faith from the roof tops.

Episcopalians have been called a lot of things. We’ve all heard them. “E-whiskopalian.” Or “country club Christians.” Or the “frozen chosen.” We could take offense. But religious types have names like this for every denomination. Rather like the old light bulb jokes...appropriate to consider as we ponder themes of light. Maybe you’ve heard them:

How many Charismatics does it take to change a light bulb? One to change the bulb and nine to pray against the spirit of darkness.

How many Baptists does it take to change a light bulb? Change? My grandmother gave the church that light bulb!

How many TV evangelists does it take to change a light bulb? One. But for the message of light to continue, send in your tax deductible donation today.

How many Catholics does it take to change a light bulb? None. Only candles are permitted.

And because we’re observing Scout Sunday today, I couldn’t resist...How long does it take for a Girl or Boy Scout to screw in a light bulb? About a week if she or he gives it a GOOD TURN DAILY! Doing a good turn daily, that is a great way to make one’s light shine regardless of one’s religious affiliation.

And finally...I know you’ve been waiting for it, How many Episcopalians does it take to change a light bulb? Well, the changing of the light bulb requires the approval by voice vote at two consecutive general conventions, to be proceeded by a proposed change circulated by the standing light committee, to be circulated for comment for a minimum of 24 months. The rubric for the number required will then be reflected in our canons. Until that time. no unauthorized changing of light bulbs will be permitted, except as required for sensitivity to diverse cultures. And, there it is. So, how are we to let our light shine?

Let’s go back a bit to the “frozen chosen.” concept. What do people mean by that? I can’t imagine that they mean that we aren’t welcoming in our churches. We are, really. Outside just about every Episcopal church in this country is a sign saying The Episcopal Church Welcomes You. We’ve even updated the invitation by placing additional signs around our churches and on our websites which state “Welcome...regardless” And here at St. Paul’s there is a huge sign on a table at the entrance to the church which spells out the word WELCOME to St. Paul’s in big bold white letters against a blue background.

When we are called the frozen chosen, it doesn’t mean we aren’t welcoming...it also doesn’t mean the furnace has broken in the church or parish hall and isn’t keeping up with the frigid cold put upon us by winter finally arriving in February.

When people call us Episcopalians the frozen chosen I do believe they mean that we aren’t shouters from the rooftops. We are hardly even knockers on doors or callers on the phone. Maybe that is why they call us frozen. But we don’t have to be. Frozen.

There is a priest named Howard Hanchey....sometime adjunct professor at the Virginia Theological seminar, and he’s spent a bit of time studying our Episcopal parishes. And way back in 1994 in a little book he authored called From Survival to Celebration, He suggests that it is wonderful and indeed necessary if we take our faith into the community and preach from street corners or rooftops or whatever. But he also affirms what we already know, that evangelizing like that makes most of us pretty uncomfortable.

So, the Rev. Mr. Hanchey offers us a new understanding of evangelism. He suggests that God will send people to our church. God will send these people here and they will come seeking
God and looking for a community that is their kind of spiritual home. Some will be Episcopalians who’ve moved and are looking for a church home. Some will have been away from the church for a long time, and are deciding whether or not this church will work for them. Some will come looking for “something”, not knowing exactly what.

And you know, I think the Rev. Mr. Hanchey is right. I have observed in my brief time here that God has been sending us people here at St. Paul’s in Cleveland Heights. God has always been sending us people. And the Rev. Mr. Hanchey believes that the most important thing we can do is to welcome those newcomers. This form of spreading God’s love is the first and most important for any parish. And this would be welcoming the people who seem to be similar to us and also the people who seem quite different. Is the newcomer half our age? Wonderful, let us welcome him or her. Is the newcomer much older than us? Wonderful, let us welcome her or him! Is there a young child or even a baby? Wonderful, let us remember how very important our Lord Jesus Christ said it is for us to lead them to God. Did their ancestors come from a different part of the world? Good, they are welcome. Do they not have even two nickels in their pocket? Jesus died without even the clothes on his back. Of course, they are welcome.

So how are we to let our light shine? Clearly we need to show our good works, to be out in the world and invite others to join us. And clearly it’s a good thing we have that table at the entrance to our church so that our welcome can be a beacon for those who are searching! Clearly, we need to be ready to welcome others who have followed God’s lead and landed in our midsts looking for the light of Christ

My companions on the Way...we are the light of the world — because we have been given the light of Christ. As we seek others to share the Good News, as we welcome others searching for the light of Christ, may Christ, God’s holy one be manifest in us that we may be a light to the world. In Nomine Dei. Amen.