

BATTERIES INCLUDED

Why Does the Manger Glow?

Text: John 1:1-5; Luke 1:46-56

The Face of Mary

When I was growing up, the Catholic Church of St. John and Mary put up each December a particularly fine crèche scene out on the lawn in front of their building. That scene, like our own live nativity here at Christ Church, was one of the gifts of Christmas to our town. The figures at that crèche scene were perpetually hushed and still. They reminded us that Christmas is less about shopping than it is about stopping -- stopping to ponder a mystery it takes quiet and stillness to really take in.

The crèche seemed a sign too that Christmas was not meant to be about everyone dashing off in their own separate directions, so much as about coming together to focus on the gifts already given. I still recall how Mary and Joseph, the shepherds and wise men – were gathered so tightly together, a holy huddle of that made me as a kid just want to crawl in. You know what I mean? Church, at its best, is still like that I think.

But what I remember best is how the face of Mary looked. To my eyes as a child, she looked so absolutely peaceful, so utterly lovely, so magnificently grateful, as her face lit up in the light of the manger glow. No matter how dark it got, no matter how cold it became, it seemed like Mary was always lit up by the light of the One in that manger.

I never did figure out exactly how those Catholics did that! There were no obvious wires around. But the manger was definitely glowing. Was there a hidden plug someplace? Were there batteries included? To this day I do not know. But this I do: There was power in that manger. It lit up Mary. It made the rest of want to get close. And, in a far greater sense, this is the way it still is today.

Hear the Word of God as it speaks to us through the Gospel According to St. John chapter 1 at verse 1: **“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. In him was life, and that life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, but the darkness has not understood it.”**

Understanding the Light

It IS hard sometimes to understand the Light. It is difficult to understand the power within the One who meets us in the manger at Christmas. To put it in the biblical language we explored last week, we are so sarx-bound... we are so limited by our **“flesh”**... we’ve been wearing what I call “singlasses” for so long, that we genuinely struggle to even conceive of the One who St. John tells us is **“Light”** and power and **“glory”** incarnate. That’s why, I think, John starts his gospel by saying **“In the**

beginning...” He calls us back to the very start of the Bible – and indeed to the larger frame of reference that is Creation itself – because there we might just catch just a glimpse of the radiant magnitude of the One who is God.

“In the beginning,” says Genesis 1:1, **“God created the heavens and the earth... and God said, ‘Let there be light,’ and there was light.”** The psalmist describes it this way in Psalm 33:6 **“By the word of the LORD were the heavens made, their starry host by the breath of his mouth.”** In other words, the Bible is saying that at the root of the Universe is a God so vast and glorious that he breathes out stars before breakfast. He speaks darkness-spattering, world-enabling energy into being at 186,000 miles a second. Psalm 19 says: **“The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands. Day after day they pour forth speech; night after night they display knowledge.”** In other words, if you want to start to get your mind touching the hem of the glorious power of God, just do what some wise men have sometimes done in history: Study the stars.

I love the way Louis Giglio helps us with this. Giglio is one of the most popular Christian speakers among college students today. In a talk entitled, *“How Great Is Our God,”* Giglio helps us consider our size relative to the starry host God has made. Think for, example, about how big and powerful we on Earth are compared to the nearest star to us. I don’t mean Oprah! I mean the Sun. The Sun pumps out energy at 10,000 degrees fahrenheit. Talk about some serious batteries. The Sun is about a million times the size of the Earth. “If the Earth were the size of a golf ball,” says Giglio, “the Sun would be 15 feet in diameter. You could put 960,000 Earths inside the Sun.”

But the Sun is actually a pretty small star. Consider the star that astronomers call Betelgeuse. Do you realize, says Giglio, that Betelgeuse is *twice the size* – you think I’m going to say twice the size of the Sun? No. Betelgeuse is twice the size of the Earth’s orbit around the Sun. To put it in Chicago-terms, if the Earth was a golf ball, and you put it down on the sidewalk, next to the Sears Tower – and you imagined four more Sears Towers stacked on top of that one – that would be the diameter of Betelgeuse compared to the Earth. Just one of the stars breathed out by our God could fit 262 trillion Earths inside of it. To put this in perspective, that is enough golf balls to fill up the United Center way more than 3000 times.

“When I heard that as a teenager,” says Giglio, “that stumped me, right there. Because most of my praying had been advising God, correcting God, suggesting things to God, drawing diagrams for God, reviewing things for God.” And then I learned about a star called Mu Cephei. Think about this: “If the Earth was a golf ball,” and you set it down at one end of the Golden Gate Bridge, and you rolled it with your finger all the way to the other end... that’s approximately 9000 feet (1.7 miles)... and then you kept going, the length of another Golden Gate Bridge, that would be the diameter of Mu Cephei in relation to earth.

But Mu Cephei isn’t even the largest star astronomers have found. There are five bigger ones – the largest of which is a star aptly named Canis Majoris. It means “the

Big Dog.” “If the Earth was a golf ball,” remarks Giglio, “Canis Majoris would be [in relation to it] the height of Mount Everest. You could fit 7 quadrillion Earths inside of Canis Majoris.”

These sorts of stars we’re talking about burn unthinkably hot. They are centers of unimaginable power. There are quadrillions of them out there, traveling at speeds and existing at distances I probably don’t have the neurons to get around. If just our galaxy -- never mind the known Universe which is filled with trillions of galaxies – but if just our galaxy were shrunk to the size of this Sanctuary – we’d have to forget golf balls. We don’t have a pinpoint small enough to approximate the size of Earth in relationship to it. Find yourself on it.

Giglio concludes: “Sin has a way of shrinking God down in our minds and puffing us up in our own estimation. But just a glance into the Universe God has made resizes everything in a heartbeat.... We are the teeny tiny ones, you and me. We are small and weak and fragile and frail. You and I are one of six-and-a-half billion people on this little golf ball-size planet in this massive universe that God has made...” **“Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. In him was life, and that life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, but the darkness has not understood it.”**

Mary You Did Know

I think back to that crèche scene at St. John and Mary’s Church. I think how Mary looked so absolutely peaceful, so utterly lovely, so magnificently grateful -- as her face lit up in the light of the manger glow. I know that was just a poetic representation there. But I think the real Mary did see the Light. I think she did understand it. I think she grasped something of the universe-warming Power in that manger. And the reason I say this is because of the famous song she sang.

Luke 1:46-56 records the words. We read them earlier. Let me just read again a few excerpts. Mary said: **“My soul glorifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has been mindful of the humble state of his servant... The Mighty One has done great things for me... His mercy extends to those who fear him... he has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts. He has brought down rulers from their thrones but has lifted up the humble. He has filled the hungry with good things but has sent the rich away empty. He has helped his servant Israel... even as he said to our fathers.”**

Both St. John and Mary make it clear that not everybody will “**understand**” or “**receive**” the meaning of Christmas. If you think that we human beings are basically “**rulers**” on the throne, on our way to becoming Masters of the Universe... If you are “**proud in [your] inmost thoughts**” of all we can do on our own without some fantasy God... If you believe that we are morally or materially “**rich**” enough to go it alone... then of course the “**Light**” won’t go on for you. Mary is especially clear about this: The

message and presence of God scatters the proud, and sends the rich away empty and just brings rulers down.

But maybe just being king or queen of a golf ball doesn't leave you overly self-impressed. Maybe you know that you're like one of those Christmas gifts that look fine on the outside, but doesn't have the batteries needed to really make them work. Perhaps you came today knowing that you need power from beyond yourself to save you from the sin that's darkening your life... Maybe you sit here knowing that you need a higher power to lift you up from that place where you've fallen down... Perhaps you are hungering and thirsting for good things and you know that you just don't have it in you to self-create the character, the relationships, the wisdom you seek... If so, then I proclaim to you good news.

Mary speaks of it in Luke 1:48. King David marveled at it in Psalm 8. It is the miracle that above this infinitesimally small mote of dust floating through cosmos there dwells a great and glorious God, the awesome and eternal God, the star-breathing God, who somehow... wonderfully... the Bible declares: is “**mindful**” of you. And, believe me, He still has more than enough **POWER** to do “**great things**” in you – great things through you.

Pray with me...

Lord God, forgive us if we've turned Christmas into a celebration of a plastic Jesus filled with D cell batteries, a quaint tradition for the sentimental or the superstitious. Forgive us if we've been going along measuring size and power in all too human terms. Today, we stop today in humility before the sheer magnitude of your power and glory and the majesty of your mindful love. Thank you for every failure, every loss, every uncomfortable glimpse of glory that reminds us that we are not the Masters of the Universe, but that You are. If there is even one person here today who has never asked you into his or her heart to be the power of God unto salvation, let today be the day and now the moment that person asks you in. If there is even one of us who desperately needs your uplifting grace, your hope-restoring Spirit, your character-changing love, your wisdom-giving truth, pour out this power today, right now. For we pray in the name of the One who is the Light that still shines among us. Amen.

Reflection Questions

1. What powers your life? What's the renewable source of energy, inspiration, and hope you draw on or seek?
2. How do you respond to the idea that in order to be filled, you must first be empty? Where do you experience emptiness?

3. If God's power is accessible primarily to the humble, the poor, or the salvation-seeker, then which of these describes you?
4. What steps might you take to become someone more personally open to the power of God and/or more of a conduit of God's power?