

The God of Light and Dark
Lent IV – Sunday, March 14, 2021
Trinity Church in the City of Boston
William W. Rich

In the name of the God who saves us, the Creator of both shining light and enfolding dark. Amen.

Exactly three hundred years ago another pandemic struck Boston. Deadlier than COVID. As in our own time, it forced people into quarantine. Houses that were stricken with the deadly affliction flew red flags outside signaling to all who passed by: "God have mercy on this house."

God have mercy, indeed. It was smallpox.

Over 6000 were infected. 850 died. The population of Boston that year was a mere 11,000. 55% of the city was infected. Over 7% died. Of those who didn't die, but were infected, most were pockmarked, and many blinded for life.

As in our own time, that pandemic stirred up strong, even violent feelings and actions. Accusations. Self-assured certainties about the disease and how to handle it.

"On a November day in 1721, a small bomb was hurled through the window of a renowned Boston preacher named Cotton Mather. Attached to the explosive, which fortunately did not detonate, was the message: "Cotton Mather, you dog, dam you! I'll inoculate you with this; with a pox to you." This was not a religiously motivated act of terrorism, but a violent response to Reverend Mather's active promotion of smallpox inoculation."

[<https://sitn.hms.harvard.edu/flash/special-edition-on-infectious-disease/2014/the-fight-over-inoculation-during-the-1721-boston-smallpox-epidemic/>]

Cotton Mather has often been remembered for and credited with introducing inoculation to the colonies and doing a great deal to promote the use of this method as the standard for smallpox prevention during the 1721 epidemic. But Mather did not develop the idea or practice of inoculation on his own. It is virtually certain that the Rev. Mr. Mather was taught about inoculation by his West African slave Onesimus. Mather himself wrote: "He told me that he had undergone the operation which had given something of the smallpox and would forever preserve him from it, adding that was often used in West Africa." After confirming this account with other West African slaves and reading of similar methods being performed in Turkey, Mather became an avid proponent of inoculation.

As the epidemic worsened, Cotton Mather reached out to the medical community of Boston, imploring them to use the inoculation method. One physician, Zabdiel Boylston, heeded his call, but most other doctors were hostile to and dismissive of the idea. Dr. Boylston inoculated his son, and the enslaved people he owned. But most physicians in Boston regarded the procedure as ridiculous,

and the resistance that surfaced bordered on rage, so that it was named "the horrid Clamour." Harriet Washington, medical ethicist and author of *Medical Apartheid* writes of our Boston forbears that they rejected the gift of inoculation, and "resented being told by a gaggle of ministers that Africans had devised the panacea they had long sought."

But this gift from a dark-skinned enslaved African saved many lives three hundred years ago. Boylston inoculated 240 people and only six of them died – "one in forty, as against the one in seven people who died who had refused inoculation." (*Caste*, Isabel Wilkerson, p. 232) The knowledge passed on by this dark skinned man from the so-called Dark Continent saved the lives of hundreds of Bostonians, and led to the eventual eradication of smallpox – still the only infectious disease ever to be entirely wiped out.

But until recently, Onesimus' name was virtually unknown, left in the dark, whereas Mather's name has been remembered, and Edward Jenner's name – the white English physician who began to use inoculation against smallpox 75 years after the Boston epidemic – Jenner's name has been held up into the light and hugely celebrated.

As beautiful and useful as metaphors are, they can also be dangerous. Contrasting light with darkness has its place, a hallowed place. After all, the One who made us and all that is spoke life into being by calling out the words, "Let there be light." But to flatten lovely and life-giving metaphor and poetry into deadening and even deadly fact by suggesting that light is always good, and darkness always evil is...well... dangerous, and even evil.

For that same Holy God who said, "Let there be light" also speaks through the inspired words of Holy Scripture words like these: *Even the darkness is not dark to you; the night is as bright as the day, for darkness is as light to you.* [Psalm 139:12]

and

I will give you the treasures of darkness, riches stored in secret places, so that you may know that I am the LORD, the God of Israel, who summons you by name. ... I form the light and create darkness. [Isaiah 45:3]

Today's Gospel says: "God so loved the world that he gave his only son. God so loved the world. *So*, meaning "in this way," not *so* meaning "*so much*."

So just as it deeply matters how we understand the metaphor of light and dark in this passage, so also it matters how we understand in what way God loved the world. What if God decided to save the world not only through light, but also through darkness? After all, remember that Jesus, the light of the world, took our human flesh in the darkness of Mary's womb, and was born to save us in the darkness of Christmas Eve. And later in the Gospel of John, Jesus reminds us that unless a grain of wheat falls into the darkness of the earth and dies, it will not bear much fruit. And as if to live out this

truth, it is good for us to remember that Easter and Jesus' resurrection, the source of our life and hope, come about not in the light of day, but in the darkness of the tomb.

It is good for us to heed the ones in our own time – who like Jesus – give us the eyes to see life and goodness in the dark. One of my wake-up calls to seeing life in the dark came about twenty years ago from a woman whose name I did not know then, and to this day, do not know. But surely, the Christ lifted up on the Cross to save, spoke to me through her.

She turned my world upside down – my spiritual world that is. I was at Union Seminary in NYC – it was in chapel – and a student I did not know was the preacher for the day. Chapel was mid-morning – and I had been up late the night before, in the dark, working on my dissertation. I was still sleepy, and not prepared to have my world turned upside down. I thought of myself as serious about God, serious about my spiritual life, and basically a good guy, pretty enlightened, clear-headed, and open-hearted. In short, too sure of myself, and unprepared to have my complacent self-assurance broken open. A kind of Christian Pharisee, if you will. On a good and right path towards God, but... well, you know... too sure that I knew the roadmap, and where the center of the truth was, and where the dangerous ditches were.

Perhaps I was not unlike Nicodemus in today's Gospel passage. He came to Jesus in the night. Was he sleepy (metaphorically speaking) - asleep at the switch, as it were - and unprepared to have his sense of rightness interrupted? Perhaps like me in the chapel at Union Seminary, he had no idea that the preacher he was about to hear would turn his eyes in a new direction, taking off his blinders so that he could see God's light in the dark.

Nicodemus was – as we learn in the opening verses of this chapter from John's Gospel – a prominent Jew, and a member of the Pharisaic party, that group so similar to Jesus and yet also different. Serious about their faith and their relationship to God, and yet so sure of themselves and their interpretation of God's ways that they were not open to hearing another way of seeing the things of God, and new and different ways of living out what God's Spirit wanted to bring into being. If you think of the Pharisees metaphorically, they are you and me, when we are too sure of ourselves. Too sure we know what God is up to. Too sure that the way we see things is the way God sees things.

Back to Union Seminary and sleepy, pharisaic me on that morning in Lent now some twenty years ago. The preacher that morning was, as I have said, a student I did not know. She was a black woman, an African-American, and as she walked to the lectern to preach, I noticed she had a battered and well-thumbed paperback copy of the Bible in her hand. I wondered: is she going to be a Bible-thumper? And given that it was Lent, I wondered: is she going to finger-wag and rail at us

about sin? I stiffened a bit, preparing myself to hear a form of preaching I did not like, with content that I feared I would like even less.

But God decided to surprise me through her. She began in a quiet way, in a calming and rich contralto voice. And she began to talk about the Bible she had carried to the lectern that morning. She told us that she took it with her wherever she went, so it would be handy for times of prayer and reflection. She was drawing me in. I liked what I was hearing. She went on to say that she always had it in the car with her, and always left it on the dashboard of the car, on the passenger side. And then she said, "You know I love sunny days. I love bright light and bright sunshine. But there's a problem with too much light." [And after a long pause, she said:] "Too much light bleaches out the truth." And she held up the Bible for all of us to see. The cover was so faded that all of us could see that you could no longer read the words "Holy Bible" on the cover. I do not remember a single thing from the rest of her sermon. All I could hear echoing in my mind and heart was: "There's a problem with too much light. Too much light bleaches out the truth."

Metaphor matters – and context counts.

We are four Sundays into Lent, and well on our way to Calvary, where we will see Jesus lifted up to save us. On a dark day, when the light faded from the sky, and darkness fell over the land from noon to three, God was up to something good. Something that contradicts all our assumptions about what is good and bad, and where light and darkness lie.

Jesus was lifted up on the Cross to save us from many things. To save us from too much self-assurance that we know the ways of God. To save us from our addiction to light, and our irrational fear of the dark. To save us from too much positive self-regard, and our refusal to see the good that lies outside our narrowed vision of goodness, blinded as we are by our addiction to the light. Too much tendency to attribute all good to things that come from the cultures and norms of the northern and western hemispheres. And too many assumptions that bad things come only from China or Africa, or places far away whose peoples and ways we know so little, and about whom we have all-too-little experience of loving and caring. When we reach Good Friday, it would be good to remember all this, and there at the foot of the Cross to be inoculated against such sinful thoughts, and the conscious or unconsciously hateful ways that arise from them.

Among us there are some who have been inoculated against COVID already. Others of us still await that life-saving moment. I invite you, for Christ's sake: when you receive your vaccine, steel yourself to look at the syringe. Have you ever noticed that every syringe has something like the shape of a cross? With the barrel flange like unto the crosspiece of the Cross, and the barrel itself like unto the upright? Steel yourself to look, and see that what lies within that syringe – which could to certain eyes look like darkness, and evil, and threat – is actually the source of new life. For in this and other unexpected ways, God saves us – brings us to health and out of our closed off self-assured selves –

brings us into communion and community with one another. Into communion and community with our Boston forebears in the epidemic of 1721. Into communion and community with our fellow citizens of earth in 2021 in this epidemic. Into communion and community with Onesimus, the dark-skinned one whose name has been left in the dark. Into communion and community with the countless nameless ones who have been developing the vaccine in our time, and the even greater number of those who were willing to go – as it were – into the dark and dangerous places where people sick with COVID needed care. There, in all these places, Christ's living love is being lifted up in the dark so that we might live. And to inoculate yourself against fear of the dark, I invite you to remember the words and music of that hymn we love to sing here at Trinity, the hymn that we sang right before this sermon, the hymn that bears the name of St. Botolph, the namesake of our beloved city of Boston. Remember and be inoculated for life by these words:

[singing]

When Christ was lifted from the earth, his arms stretched out above, through every culture every birth, to draw an answering love.

An answering love. Let Christ's syringe, the Cross, draw from you and me an answering and lifegiving love. Amen.

WW Rich – 14 March, 2021