

“Curious Creatures are Drawn to the Light”

A Sermon Shared with the Congregation of St. Andrew's United Church
for Epiphany Sunday January 8, 2017 at 10:30 a.m.

Scripture Readings: Isaiah 60:1-6

Matthew 2:1-12

(by The Rev. Dr. Bill Steadman)

We have all seen it. Back in the days before motion lights, a back porchlight was left on in the evening, and the moths would circle the light, gaining both in speed and numbers.

Now artificial light seems to animate moths. Some experts suggest that the artificial light sets off their balance, for they orient themselves based on the starlight and moonlight at night, and so assume light means it is from the sky, and so the attraction to any light they see.

Others have suggested the attraction to light is a factor of the phototaxis of the moths – they are attracted to light (cockroaches are repelled by light, and so seek hidden places in the kitchen if you have ever experienced them), but moths usually do not see a light that they are not attracted to, even if it is a candle or a bonfire which can end their lives.

Moths are not the only creatures to be attracted by light. While bats do their best work at night, they find a certain attraction to lights in the bush, wondering what the light is, before they disappear into the darkness. It is said that a challenge for reforestation after a fire or for wild vegetation growth after a drought is the fact light pollution is infiltrating wooded areas, and bats are less likely to be in those areas and so unable to distribute seeds from their eating of the fruit and vegetation. Light pollution is limiting the bats' habitat.

Anyone in a neighbourhood that is foreign, or lost on a hike, gets excited by seeing a cabin or home with a light on, hoping safety and security is located there.

The way that the prophet Isaiah speaks about the comfort and assurance of God is like all of those experiences. We are attracted to a light and we no longer feel surrounded by darkness.

Studies have shown that people find the winter difficult in the northern hemisphere because the amount of sunlight is much less. And that is especially true in areas where there are many snow storms or cloudy conditions. One thing I like about northern Ontario from my first winter in 1977-78 was the fact we usually get snow or clear skies, and mostly clear skies.

In recent years the leakage of southern Ontario weather has spread north – have you noticed how many days it is colder in Toronto than Timmins in winter, and contrariwise the number of days it is hotter in Timmins and Sudbury than Toronto in summer? But sunlight is more prevalent here than most places in the country, summer or winter.

So what is the attraction of sunlight, or light in general?

It gives us a sense of energy and hope.

It provides us with an awareness of the world around us.

It allows us to find clarity on many levels.

We know that a sunny day does make a difference in our lives, or if we are needing energy, we turn on lights and listen to uplifting music.

Being aware of our spiritual needs is called “enlightenment” and it involves bring a sense of light to our subconscious to help us into a new awareness, spiritual and personal.

Studies have shown that exposure to the sunlight on a regular basis day by day is far healthier than our usual pattern of going into the sun for concentrated times but periodically in the year. We are a people of the light, and so we seek light.

The wise ones, guided by a star, looked for a light beyond them to lead them into the scene of the birth of Jesus. It is natural that we seek something significant beyond ourselves to lead us into the life that we are called to live.

Light has become a symbol of the presence of God for it is separate from us, and draws us into a new relationship with the world and one another.

We want clarity in our lives. We want hope in our future planning. We seek opportunity for the new and the reassuring.

Even the comic strips often have a light bulb drawn in a cartoon box to indicate that the character in question has a bright new idea. If the “light goes on,” we have new insight that we seek.

The Light of Hope Foundation serves St. Paul’s Hospital in downtown Vancouver, a display of lights that takes 150 volunteers to assemble that reminds people of the hope needed in the world.

The Hope and Light Initiative out of Washington State tries to provide a sense of hope to young women in war-torn and forgotten areas of the world where their well-being, educational opportunities, and basic health needs are secondary to those who run the lands in which they live.

Faith and Light is a foundation co-established by Jean Vanier to support individuals with mental challenges in order for them to live in a world where they have the same opportunities as others.

It built on the L’Arche concept begun in 1964 by Vanier, where communities of individuals were housed together in order to find value and wholeness in life. There are 29 L’Arche communities in Canada alone, two here in northern Ontario.

The principles of L’Arche are seen as religious principles, and build on a basis which includes the following:

- 1) That whatever their strengths, people are all bound together in a common humanity;

- 2) That everyone has the same dignity and same rights, including the right to home, to work, to friendship, and to a spiritual life;
- 3) A truly just and compassionate society welcomes its most vulnerable citizens, and provides them with opportunities to contribute meaningfully to the communities in which they live; and,
- 4) Systems of belief, be they secular or religious, make the world a better place only when they promote the dignity of all human beings.

We often forget that the wise ones came in a very challenging time religiously, and crossed their own religious traditions in order to be present at the birth of Jesus. Traditionally, we take the story to mean that Jesus was so important even people of other faiths saw his importance, but it may also be important for us in our time to see that Jesus was so significant that he brought light to bear on all of our religious traditions, and invited us to be open to what people of other faiths have to say to us.

Epiphany is not just a time for the light of Christ to be present for us to give to others, but it is a time for the light of Christ to illumine our lives so that we may be present with others, no matter where their journey takes them.