

ST BART'S



A Sermon by:

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A Star Named for You

*Sermon preached at the eleven o'clock service, January 26, 2014
The Third Sunday after the Epiphany: Based on Matthew 4:12-23*

I have always loved stars—the kind in the sky, not the kind in Hollywood, although I like some of them, too. But the stars in the sky I love because of the way they win over darkness. I admit that a starlit sky is largely dark, but it is the stars that we remember much more than the darkness. They seem to sparkle—because they do; and even when they are not visible at a particular moment, our memory of them reminds us that total darkness is always temporary. Only in the throes of deep pathology do we utterly forget that the stars are there, burning brightly even if temporarily veiled, ready to break through the clouds at any moment.

At a point in my son's life during those almost-but-not-quite grown years, getting gifts from him on birthdays and other occasions was a hit-or-miss proposition. One year during that distracted time, my birthday rolled around without a word from him, and I braced myself not to take it personally. When the mail came that day, though, amongst several cards there was a big envelope that didn't look too interesting. In fact, I almost tossed it, thinking it was just an expensive advertisement. Luckily I didn't and quickly opened it to find inside an official looking document, announcing to me that my son had had a star named for me. I forget the details of the process; I think it was all the rage for a while. A star, named for me, living eternally, burning brightly. I am relatively sappy about things in general, and in particular about things as close to my heart as he is, but this small gift remains one of the most extraordinary things I have ever received: a piece of light bearing my name and most particularly a light given by my son. The fact is, I later learned but never shared with him, the whole process was a bit of a scam. Officially only galaxies are named, and so apparently my starlight may actually live only in a long lost computer of a scam artist. But it doesn't change a thing for me: In my galaxy, my son gave my name to a bit of light. And I'll treasure that intention forever.

"The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness—on them light has shined."

We want light; we need it. In the most fundamental ways in its absence we do not know which way to go. We stumble and fall. One of the ways we understand darkness of the soul is that by will or illness we have in such times moved ourselves to a corner of life that is dark, a corner we experience as being void of God. A theological discussion of light in our lives is not so much about disposition as it is the state of our heart. The light of which the scripture speaks, the kind of light that shines upon us when we are centered—centered on God, on what is true about us and others in the world, on goodness and justice—is not gauged by how sunny our mood is or isn't but by where and how our heart is. Is our heart hard and closed, so filled with fear of being hurt or something that we shut it down? Do we even think much about our heart or do we live solely and soullessly in our heads or in our possessions or obsessions or accomplishments?

A sad thing about our present culture is that we continue to create young "stars," who have it all just before they have nothing. Justin Bieber is the latest of a growing list of teen idols to implode, a process made all the worse now by the ubiquity of paparazzi and a public thirsty for their pictures. Before you conclude—incidentally not without some accuracy—that I am an old fogey who doesn't understand modern life, think about this. We have watched as Justin became unglued, I think, because he is unequipped for the unlimited resources laid before him and because the chronological adults in his life appear to have lost sight of anything that is truly important. It is his smart-aleck little face that is on the mug shot, but our culture of

materialism and life without moral compass shares the culpability. There is no light in this story—for the kind of light needed to grow in grace and truth and good sense is not purchasable. My heart hurts for him and for us. The light has come, but the darkness is often still deep.

Yesterday I presided at a memorial Eucharist for a parishioner who died a few weeks ago. One of the speakers told a story about a musician friend of his who has been a working musician in a variety of settings for a number of years, a gig here, a gig there. He told us that a common acquaintance of his and the musician's, a man they had both known since childhood, recently said to him, "Do you think so and so is ever going to make it?" This wise speaker said, "Well, I think he has already made it and is making it—for he is doing what he truly loves to do." A little story this is—but the story of a person who has seen and followed his great light and is living in its glow.

Stories like these two and countless others cause me to think, as I do so often, about what the church is really about, about what our true message is, about our reason for continuing to be. As I read the scriptures for this week, one essentially quoting the other, it occurred to me that this great struggle between light and darkness is the struggle of our lives. The light has indeed come into world; I accept that promise of the scriptures. But even in the dazzling brightness of God's light, there is always the option to choose darkness. One unmistakable reason for our being a community of faith, a community that shapes and forms our children and ourselves, is to contain and inform the struggle of us as honest, flawed people, who attempt to live in the light. It is a grave responsibility.

The church loses its light when its focus is exclusively on correct belief. What we know about Jesus' life is unmistakable evidence for a different direction than that. Again and again he demonstrated that what matters always more than what we believe is how we act. In fairness, the church has over the years understood on some level that premise but continues to miss the mark by having a narrow focus on what it means to live in the light. The church understandably has attempted to codify every imaginable outward action and in doing so has failed to focus on the transformation of our hearts, which is what truly matters.

The one dearest in the world to me has a framed saying that reminds me of this great truth. It reads, "No one has to tell you when it is right." For me that *is* what it means to be made in the image of God: No one has to tell us when it is right. We know what is good; we know what is just and merciful. Our great dilemmas as people choosing between light and darkness lie not in knowing which to choose but in our strength and conviction to choose the light. We know ridiculous excess when we see it; we know when we are giving our lives and our souls to things that do not matter; we know when our focus is only as wide as our little lives with no regard to others beyond ourselves; we know when we are mean-spirited and selfish—all to say that we know when we are living in darkness.

But here is the good news: We also know the occasions when we choose to live in the light. Far from being a martyr, living in the light means experiencing the joy for which we truly were created—the joy of an open, generous and loving heart, the joy from doing with our lives what truly and deeply pleases us, the painful though precious joy that comes from seeing the hurt and need in the world not overwhelm us but inspire us to give and love from an awakened heart that dares to feel, the joy that comes from recognizing the light when it is all around us.

Tonight is predicted to be partly cloudy, which means there will be some stars even in the city where stars are always hard to see. Take a glance at them. Even if there are only a few and there is not one named for you, there will be enough to remind us what is right—for we live not in a land of darkness but in one in which a great light has come to shine.

In the name of God: *Amen.*