



ST BART'S

A Sermon by
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Light in Selma

Sermon preached at the eleven o'clock service, January 11, 2015

The First Sunday after the Epiphany: The Baptism of Our Lord—Based on Mark 1: 4-11

Then God said, "Let there be light"; and there was light. And God saw that the light was good."

On Friday afternoon I saw the new film *Selma*. For more than two hours, I sat transfixed, hardly able to breathe at some points, welling with tears at others, feeling such despair at the human condition one moment, and praising God—really, really praising God—for giving these extraordinary men and women the strength to keep their eyes on the prize—and by doing so giving a generation, my generation, the power to hope. Through Dr. King, and not only through him but through other astonishingly brave individuals, some known and many not, God said once again in a loud and undeniable voice, "Let there be light"; and there was light and it was good and it cost a lot.

Today from Genesis we read a short snippet of the seminal myth of the Judaic-Christian tradition, the story of creation. In it, God is portrayed as providing light at the start of the saga. Of course, it is myth; of course, it is metaphor; and, of course, it points to truth in a profound way: God understands that only light brings the fullness of life. Certainly a form of life exists in darkness, but for life to be brought into the fullness of creation, there has to be light. And it was upon beholding this presence of light in the world that the Primordial God first uttered the affirmative words for all creation, "It is good."

I grew up within easy driving distance of Selma, Alabama in a different state but the same world: a world of unquestioned white privilege. Although I was fortunate not to be reared by parents filled with hate, I breathed the air and drank the water in a world in which four little black girls, Addie Mae Collins, Denise McNair, Carole Robertson and Cynthia Wesley, all spit-polished and ready for Sunday School in Birmingham one morning were killed by a bomb. And I lived in the world in which Jimmie Lee Jackson, a young black man trying to protect his grandfather and mother, was murdered by a patrolman as the three attempted to march across a Selma bridge—simply seeking the unencumbered right to vote.

It was a dark world, and watching the grim reminder of what I can hardly remember as a ten-year-old deeply affected me on Friday as I sat in the back of a darkened theater on 86th Street. It shook me up all over again, and I am thankful to God that it did, for both you and I know that as bright as the world is, not all the light needed has yet come. Because progress is real—no one denies that we have come a long way—and because it is important to us to claim that, it is not always popular to admit how far we have yet to go. This outstanding film stings in part because it feels timely in some ways and because we *know* that the blight of racism lingers in our country, in the world, and in some of the dark corners of our own hearts—corners, crevices desperately in need of the light. If there is one thing I believe about what we are put here on this earth to do, it is that in a variety of ways—vocations, choices, occupations—we are called to seek the light, to never stop seeking the light, to live as children of the light. My guess is that God cares less about the particular choices we make about such things as vocation and occupation than God cares about this one simple admonition: in whatever we do, live as those who have seen the light.

Given who I am, this should not be surprising but somehow it is: *Selma* reminded me how definitively it is that the story of Jesus is *the* story that shines the brightest light *for me*. It is that light, the light of Christ, which shows me, when I am open to seeing it, the truth about the "isms"—racism, sexism, homophobia, xenophobia, and all the others. The light does not make it easy to live as Jesus taught, but it almost guarantees a life of discomfort, immensely valuable discomfort, when I choose knowingly to live in darkness. Realizing this again was somehow

oddly epiphanous. I *know* when I am choosing to live in darkness, and so do you. I still stumble around in darkness a good portion of the time and no doubt shall continue to do so; but by God and thank God, I have enough sense to recognize when the darkness is winning and enough sense to know that that is clearly not good—for me or for the world. I want to live in the light, and I believe you do, too.

I mention my unusual sentence this week about the power of the story of Jesus in my formation for two reasons. First, in watching *Selma* I realized again how deeply religious the early leaders of the civil rights movement were, of how much strength they derived from the stories of deliverance in the Old Testament and the accounts of Jesus' loving and healing presence, particularly among the poor and marginalized. They told these stories like they meant something, and I was struck by their power and by the desire not to lose them. If in freeing these stories from literalism and mean misuse, we have lost their power, we are sadly diminished. Second, even as I realized the source of light in my life, the story of Jesus, I acknowledged just as deeply how utterly defined it is and always has been by my cultural context: I am a Christian because of where I was born. But rather than being disheartened by that admission, at the same moment I realized and acknowledged gratefully that the light of God is bigger than any *one* story—and that truth is the hope of the whole world!

Earlier this week, I read a story about an Afghani man who is a shining beacon of light in his rather small life. Malik Abdul Hakim lives meagerly in southern Afghanistan. In an unexpected turn of events, he spends his life going in, through and around battle lines to collect the war dead on both sides, ferrying them home to their families, giving some modicum of peace and dignity to those who have died. A Muslim himself caught in the struggle between the Afghan government and the Taliban, he serves without regard for either side, concerned with only one thing: that the dead soldiers are returned to their homes. After the Taliban killed his own sons, he went in search of their bodies, finding them in a shallow grave by digging for two hours with only his hands. When asked how he could continue to serve both sides, he responded that he does this for God and that he calls both sides his brothers, adding, "If it took me this long to find my sons, imagine how long it must take ordinary people; I continue doing what I do for the sake of the powerless." Through Mr. Hakim in another tradition, God says again in a loud and powerful voice: "Let there be light."

I continued to give thanks for this man, Mr. Hakim, as the dark events of the week unfolded. The light burned very dimly this week in Paris and in northeastern Nigeria, the former receiving all sorts of coverage, the latter sadly not so much. Even our sensitivity about terror is largely ethnocentric and geographic. But darkness is darkness, and in both cases the jihadists acted with hatred and certainty, their egregious actions having been bred in the conviction that only one way is the true way. That certainty, whether it derives from our story or from anyone else's, is a great lie, one which only the light of God can truly expose.

God said, Let there be light; Martin Luther King said, Let there be light; Malik Abdul Hakim says, Let there be light. And there is light and it is good and it continues to come into the world—coming through people just like you and me. Let there be light.

In the name of God: *Amen*.