Sermon "*The Heavens: A Meditation on the Handiwork of God*."
January 8, 2023—Epiphany Sunday Pastor Dan Peterson

Grace to you and peace, from God, the dark depth and mystery informing all things that are, and the Son of God Jesus Christ, who makes that mystery personally present to each of us.

As you already have observed, we are orienting our prayers, our music, and today's message to the theme of "stars." So, you'll notice that continue over the course of the service. And as I just said, my homily here is no exception. My title is "*The Heavens: A Meditation on the Handiwork of God*."

I wanted to do something different this morning. Instead of offering a conventional sermon, the kind that has a clear beginning, middle, and end, I wanted to offer, as the title of today's homily suggests, a meditation in honor of Epiphany—the season that turns our gaze to the heavens, and how, as Psalm 19 tells us, they "declare the glory of God." How what the ancients experienced as "the dome" of the sky—something more-recent translations render as "the expanse"—proclaims the handiwork of God.

I wanted, in short, to speak to the mystic in each of us by offering fragments of Scripture and Christian tradition to ponder, so that together, however briefly, we could appreciate more deeply the mystery of the cosmos, the universe that has its "uni-source" in the capital-M Mystery we call "God."

Wouldn't that be fun?

No answer…

But then, *but then*, in spite of what I wanted to do, I remembered a problem: one I explored in a sermon several years ago, regarding what the theologian Catherine Keller calls "light supremacy" in Scripture and Christian tradition. And how this light supremacy, this privileging of light imagery for God, can explicitly as well as subconsciously inform racism in our churches, our culture, and our community. It's pervasive, my younger (and slightly-less gray-colored-bearded) self argued. I mean, the word light appears 295 times in the Bible! In every single instance, moreover, (with the exception of when it simply occurs as a reference to the time of day), the writers of Scripture depict light in unambiguously and overwhelmingly positive terms.

Let's go back for a second to the beginning. According to Genesis 1:4 when God separates light from darkness, God sees that the light was good. The book of Proverbs equates righteousness, that is living a morally upright life, with light. The book of Ecclesiastes, one of my favorites in Scripture, likewise equates light with wisdom.

The New Testament characterizes light in much the same way. 1 Timothy 6:16, as you heard in the introduction to our service, tells us that God dwells in unapproachable light. Ephesians 5:8 refers to followers of Christ as "the children of the light." And in John 8, Jesus says, "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have light that is the light of life." Even our first reading for today,

Isaiah 60, implicitly equates darkness with evil and light with good. "For darkness shall cover the earth," it says, "and thick darkness the peoples. But the Lord will arise upon you and His glory will appear over you. Nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn."

Notice the language; it's pervasive. Light, whether at the dawn of creation, in the writings of the prophet, or in the epiphany of God in Jesus Christ, is good.

Darkness by contrast, is bad. It appears 194 times in the Bible, almost 100 times fewer than the word light. Often, as in the examples I have already shared, it's negative. It symbolizes ignorance, depravity, and evil. In the New Testament, Jesus even uses it occasionally in parables to describe the nature of hell, a place the poet John Milton, in his great work *Paradise Lost*, once described as "no light but rather darkness visible." (See if you can picture that for a moment. That was the experience, I later learned, of a blind man, whose daughters wrote down the poetry he dictated to them. Hell as a place of no light, but rather "darkness visible.")

Then consider these words of Jesus in the parable. "Bind him hand and foot," a king says in one of Jesus's parables, "and throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth." Martin Luther actually translated this as "weeping and chattering of teeth." So, for him, hell was a place of cold darkness, not a place of fire and brimstone. (Incidentally, the fire and brimstone way of thinking about hell is because in part people observed volcanoes, and they saw lava coming out, and so they concluded that if indeed hell is at the center of the universe—a place where people who text during movies and movie theaters should go—then it's full of fire, which we see evidence for in the overflowing of lava and volcanoes.)

Our hymns likewise, unfortunately, portray darkness if you will, in a negative light, "Brightest and best of the stars of the morning," we sang in the first stanza of our gathering hymn, "dawn on our darkness and lend us your aid." Notice the contrast. The light is associated here with the good, and the darkness is associated with our sinfulness, our depravity, our ignorance, perhaps even our evil. Once again, it's pervasive.

Yet it's also, I would say, understandable: after all, darkness naturally symbolizes the unknown, which explains why Proverbs and Ecclesiastes equate it with ignorance, whether it's ignorance of right and wrong in the case of the Proverbs, or ignorance of wisdom according to Ecclesiastes. That said, when we use darkness not merely to describe ignorance, but to represent evil and vilify others, we potentially become complicit in the very evil we condemn.

That's worth unpacking. So, give me a minute and let me explain. Light and dark, or white and black, are not in themselves good or bad. That bears repeating: light and dark, or white and black, are not in themselves good or bad. They are symbols, or socially-constructed binaries we use to place value on things.

Unfortunately, these categories and contrasts can sometimes leap from the pages of scripture to the pigments of people's skin. We see this bear itself out repeatedly in the

history of Christian evangelism, particularly of indigenous peoples, and how the indigenous peoples, because they're people of color, are somehow lesser than the white Christians bringing the Gospel to them. The same goes for the association of darkness with depravity, as we sometimes hear in our hymns, the association with evil; whereas "holiness and white" represents the good—as you see, of course, in the alb.

Indeed, as the widest denomination in America—and that includes both our denomination the Evangelical Lutheran Church, as well as the Lutheran Church Missouri Synod—therefore, I believe we must be the first, or among the first, to confess our often-subconscious racism, and confront it, by recognizing how scripture and our tradition can and have lent themselves to the mistreatment and marginalization of people of color by denigrating darkness.

Wow, that's a tall order. How can we do that? How can we confess, and then confront, the sin of racism, as evident in the "light supremacy" of Scripture and subsequent Christian tradition?

My answer? By returning to scripture, to hear what the radio broadcaster Paul Harvey used to call "the rest of the story," which is to say, how darkness often has another meaning when applied to God.

This is fascinating. In so doing, we can help stem the tide of racism in our church and culture, by showing that black is not always bad, and white is not always right. And just to be clear, our task is not to throw out the light imagery of scripture or in song, much of which is quite beautiful, but rather to *complement* it by listening to the voices that elevate darkness as another way of conveying what the Apostle Paul and Romans calls "the depth, the riches and the mystery" of God.

So listen closely, as I try to uncover the rest of the story and rehabilitate darkness next to the light. We begin once again at the beginning. You remember Genesis 1:4, right? I mentioned it earlier. (I have to ask that because yesterday I was having a conversation with a friend of mine who's 55—I'm 50—and we both noticed that we're starting to forget things we talked about 10 minutes ago. So for all of you who are 50 and above, you have my deepest empathy, and you also now know why I bring this up explicitly again: Genesis 1:4.) It says that when God created light, God saw that it was good. Notice, however, that Genesis 1:4 never says that "darkness is bad!" That's important! After all—and I say this to Matt Boysen and those of us who attended the wonderful forum on space exploration earlier this morning—the only way we can see the lights that populate the nighttime sky is against the backdrop of darkness. You can't have one without the other.

Think about that.

What better way to represent the broad mystery of the universe, as well as the deep mystery of the uni-source—that is, the broad history of creation, as well as the ground and depth of creation that we call God, a ground and depth that makes every moment of creation possible.

Now, speaking of the cosmos and the dark depths out of which it was formed, God does some of God's best work in darkness: in the soil that produces vegetation, in the birth of a child, and the holiness of Silent Night, and even in the darkness of Christ's tomb. And again, it's this darkness that symbolizes the mystery of God so beautifully. The height and depth about which an anonymous Christian mystic of the fifth or sixth century described as the "brilliant darkness of a hidden silence." Think about that for a moment. A very subtle way to evoke the silent, brilliant darkness in the midst of its hiddenness. Indeed, it's the same darkness the author of 2 Samuel 22 uses to describe the dwelling place of God, how God " made darkness around him his canopy, thick clouds, a gathering of water," and it's the same darkness that enfolds God and Moses as they meet at the top of Mount Sinai, according to Exodus 33, and it's the same darkness that Psalm 139 and Job 10 say, is "as light to God."

In other words, while we as human beings may experience light and dark as opposites, for God, who transcends both, as a kind of radiant darkness, the two are ultimately one.

Darkness points to the inexhaustible mystery of God, which always remains, even after the revelatory Light of God, according to Ephesians, as well as our Gospel reading for today, has entered the world in Christ.

As I argued long ago in my dissertation for my PhD, God reveals God's self as hidden. That's why darkness is such a great medium for divine revelation. We need this darkness, as well as the light, to experience God, even though God transcends both as the uni-source of everything. Dark and light are necessary for connecting us with the divine.

Unfortunately, the opposite is pervasive, as I've been saying. Scripture in Western culture often equates light or white with the good, and darkness or black with the bad. Now obviously, we can't dismantle racism merely by becoming aware of this binary. But what a powerful first step we would take, as my younger self said several years ago, if we recognized it, and challenged it, not by rejecting the light imagery we use for God, but by complementing it and expanding it with the positive ways scripture and Christian tradition also use *darkness* to point to the depth and riches and mysteries of God, to quote again the Apostle Paul.

It's time in short, to end light supremacy, by balancing it with darkness in our singing and speech about God, just as it's balanced in the cosmos: "the canopy," as 2 Samuel says, that enfolds the greatest mystery of them all, namely, the nature and being of God itself. May each of us learn to find God therefore in *all* things, from the stars that dazzle and glitter across the nighttime sky, to the darkness that makes it possible for us to see them.

God is in *all of it*, and *all of it*, the light and the dark, comes from God.

In Jesus name,

Amen.