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## **“Walk In the Light”**

Isaiah 60:1-6

John 1:1-18

A few months ago, a Norwegian comedy duo known as Ylvis released an incredibly catchy dance song called “The Fox” or “What Does the Fox Say?” (They don’t really ever answer that question – it varies in different verses from “hatee-hatee-hatee-ho” to “gading-ding-ding-ding-dingading” and so on.) It was meant to be a joke, but it was accompanied with a beautifully absurd video featuring a forest full of dancers in papier-mâché animal heads, and it immediately went viral. It’s been parodied countless times already – including some Harvard Medical students’ version “What Does the Spleen Do?” – but my favorite version was made by a group of Quakers in Massachusetts, about the founder of Quakerism, George Fox. (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PhsvqbCIaAs>)

Called, of course, “What Does George Fox Say?,” their version describes his life in England in the early 1600s, his increasing dissatisfaction with the institutional church, and his insight through prayer that Jesus himself was the only one who could speak to his depressed and frustrated condition. The captions include quotations from Fox’s writings, such as “The Lord does not dwell in man-made temples, but in people’s hearts,” and “Be still in your own mind and spirit, and then you will feel the principle of God to turn your mind to the Lord God, from whom life comes.”

A parody video is certainly not the usual vehicle for serious theological discussion, but then, their video has also most likely reached some folks who don’t often read 17th-century theological texts. I grew up in a Quaker school, and even I learned some new things about their beliefs! Fox’s challenge to the church of his day came from his belief in simplicity; that the rituals and hierarchy of the church were unnecessary at best and superstition at worst, because believers could experience God’s presence in any place and be inwardly transformed without the intervention of an educated clergyperson. He was imprisoned several times for blasphemy and disturbing the peace, since he felt led by his convictions to challenge the unjust actions and rulings of political leaders.

That strain of Quaker theology continues to the present, as the Society of Friends has been a leading Christian voice on any number of issues like the abolition of slavery, the rights of women, prison reform, and many more. Fox urged his followers to “be patterns and examples, wherever you go, that your carriage and life may preach to all sorts of people. Then you will come to walk cheerfully over the world, answering that of God in everyone. Thereby you can be a blessing in them, and make the witness of God in them bless you.”

The idea that we might see God and know God through our own personal experience, and through the presence of God in others, is certainly distinctive to Quaker thinking, but it is by no means exclusive. Christian churches have struggled since at least the fourth century with the urge to contain spiritual experience into particular times and places, governed by trained leaders who keep control over who is allowed to speak or participate. The idea that the Holy Spirit might come to any person is a beautiful and exciting one – that certainly seems like an idea Jesus might have – but it is by nature

unpredictable.

And as much as we as humans are thrilled and moved when unexpected beautiful things happen, it seems like we're often willing to trade that for predictability, stability, and the illusion of control.

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We've come, today, to the last day of the Christmas season. Tomorrow is the feast of Epiphany, the day in our calendar that marks the light of Christ's birth shining out across the world, drawing all people towards God. Finally we add the magi to our creche scenes; the star is shining bright and all people are drawn in.

And today we read a very different kind of story of Christ's birth. John has no use for this quaint manger scene; he has a much grander story to tell. In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God. And the Word became flesh and dwelled among us, and that life was the light of all people.

Are we talking about the same infant Jesus, here?? How could we, possibly? An ordinary baby, born in an ordinary town to ordinary people. The eternal Word, coexistent with God before all time?

But of course, there's no such thing as an ordinary baby. Somehow, even as the star shining above this particular extra-ordinary baby draws seekers from across the world towards him, this baby contains within himself all the swirling vastness of the universe, through all time, echoing back to its very creation.

And this very paradox is the heart of Christmas, the heart of the incarnation and the deepest root of the Christian faith. We dare to affirm that God's eternal Word was made real in our world in the tiniest spark of a baby born in curious circumstances to a poor girl in an occupied country, a baby whose very first weeks on earth were spent as a refugee. That life was the light of all peoples. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.

It feels like an impossible paradox, doesn't it? And so we tell one story or the other. We can think of one special baby in a stable, or even a baby in the section of a one-room Mediterranean house of that period meant for the animals. Or we can think of the eternal Word, somewhere abstractly off in space with God. But it is almost impossible to imagine that these might be two tellings of the very same story.

A story like that would be dangerous. It's as if we are trying to put that brilliant, anomalous star the magi followed into the manger itself. A comet, burning with a force we can barely imagine, wrapped in swaddling clothes and nestled in a bed of hay. *That* story would set something on fire! That quaint little stable would be burnt to the ground.

If a poor carpenter's son in a war-torn country can himself be God on earth, him with so little formal education (let alone theological training!) there's no telling *what* might happen. God could speak through anyone! God's light could shine forth from some nobody!

We might see God through CeCe McDonald, a young transgender woman who has been held in a

men's prison for a year and a half for defending herself against a vicious attack, set to be released this month; through Kieran Romney, an African-American child adopted into the very white Romney family, whose very existence seems to be making so many people squirm; through any one of the millions of people across the country suffering from the bitter cold this week without adequate shelter or housing.

It's a threat, and so we tone down the scandal of God's light shining in the darkness. If just anyone were allowed to preach, who knows what difficult words we might have to hear! And so we continue to build up walls and containers and hierarchies and restrictions, because God's Spirit swirling in our midst is a scary thing. We create systems and micro-manage them, until we need prior approval to celebrate our sacraments, because we can't have incarnation happening just willy-nilly. What would we put down in the minutes??

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The prophet Isaiah in our reading this morning is speaking to a people who have gotten bogged down in the rebuilding of their temple – they have returned from exile, but it has not quite been the grand restoration they had dreamed of. They imagined the days past when the city sparkled with the temple's grandeur, when it seemed like everyone was there worshipping together in the same way – those glory days before the captivity in Babylon were long past, and only the very oldest among them might actually remember. The former days had taken on the golden sheen of memory. I can just imagine the talk of the elders: Remember how beautiful the temple was! So full of people and bustling with life and activity!

But the ambitious building project has hit the inevitable bumps in the road – all the realities of raising money, the needs of everyday life getting in the way; what feels like the reality of building upgrades throughout the ages! And there is fear that God has abandoned them, that their worship will never be restored to the old ways, that generations to come will not know God in the ways that they have.

And just two chapters prior, Isaiah has criticized them that their fasting and observance have become empty rituals. That they humble themselves in worship only to be seen doing so. And so the words of *hope* that Isaiah gives them are words of restoration to glory; that the light of God will shine not just on them but *through* them; that all people will see God through them and will flock to them.

And yet, knowing God, this restoration will not quite be the way they imagine it, either. God has a way of working through people in ways that don't always make sense to us. The story of incarnation that's at the center of the Christian faith still has the power to frustrate and scandalize us, even today. How on earth could God's Word, God's light, shine so brilliantly through such ordinary people?

It doesn't really make sense, if we're thinking in human terms. But then, God has something bigger in mind. We make plans, because we need to, and we expect particular things because otherwise we'd never know what was coming. It certainly makes sense to prepare for a winter storm, at least a little, if we think one might be on the way.

We've gotten out of the habit of expecting miracles, and even more than that, we've almost stopped expecting God to speak to us at all. We start to leave God to the professionals, and our holiest rituals start to become empty habits.

But they don't have to. God's light is shining for all people, in and through the most ordinary things of our world. Through regular people, through everyday bread and wine and water, we can catch a glimpse of the light of God's incarnate Word; as far off as the beginnings of the universe and as close and as human as a newborn baby.

All we have to do is look, and listen. Lift up your eyes and look around, Isaiah says, for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon *you*. We will probably feel lost sometimes, we may feel like all we can see is dark and gloom ahead on our paths. But there is an unusual star in the sky, and people across the world have started to notice.

We too can walk toward that light, to follow that star. That light is life, that light is Jesus our Christ; that light shines on us and through us, and the darkness has not overcome it.

Thanks be to God.