

AUDEMUS

To Members of the Board of Trustees and Close Friends of San Francisco Theological Seminary

January 2015

Dear Friends,

In the Revised Common Lectionary, the Gospel lesson for the First Sunday after Epiphany is always the Baptism of Jesus. But what is interesting to me are the Old Testament texts that are paired with this Gospel lesson. This year it was Genesis 1:1-5 (paired with Mark).

“In the beginning, God.
In the beginning, God created...
The heavens and the earth.
Earth was without form and void (tohu wa-bohu),
Darkness covered the face of the deep,
And the Spirit soared like an eagle over the face of the waters.

Then God said, ‘Let there be light.’
And. There. Was. Light.
And God saw that the light was good.

And God separated the light from the darkness.
God called the light Day, and the darkness God called Night.
And there was evening and there was morning, the first day.”

There is almost too much to say about these 5 verses of scripture. Each word, each phrase, each thought contains a universe of meaning. But let’s zero in on this: Light is the primordial act of creation.

In a world such as we now are experiencing, a world writhing in darkness, the word of hope that comes to us is the presence of light—light that shines regardless of the darkness, despite the darkness, in defiance of the darkness. There is light and its properties are unique. Darkness simply disappears in the presence of light.

This is not some Manichean version of the world, a dualistic approach that divides the world into good and evil, light and dark, and proposes a war between them. We have enough of that already—people who presume that their way of perceiving, understanding, acting is the Right Way and that all others are simply wrong and need to be snuffed out.

We are all drawn to the simplicities of dualistic thinking. As Christian ethicist William F. May writes, “Religious dualism has mapped out the cultural landscape of the nation into a war between the heartland and the two coasts—Main Street vs. Hollywood, Washington, DC, and Wall Street. ... Dualism chronically tempts any society that wearies of the complexities and compromises of politics and seeks to substitute for politics the apparent clarities of battle.”¹

¹ William F. May, *Testing the National Covenant: Fears and Appetites in American Politics*, (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2011) xi.

Religion—whether Christian, Jewish, Muslim, Hindu, or any other great religion of the world—is no less susceptible to such temptation. We see such dualism manifest in fanatics and fundamentalists of every stripe. They are ready to go to war—and even to literally kill—in service to their version of the world and “the way things are supposed to be.” They are mad in the pursuit of power and their religion sanctions their madness. God is their weapon and their commander in chief. Such thinking pervades our world—from France to Ferguson, the Middle East to Mississippi, Afghanistan to Albuquerque, Syria to Seattle.

But that’s not what the opening lines of Genesis are hoping to elicit from us. The poetry and point of these first five verses are meant to evoke awe and wonder. They speak to our deepest questions about human existence, life on planet earth, our connection to ultimate things. And they remind us of how essential and important Light is to life itself, to the Creation. Light is not tangible; you can’t touch it. But without it, there is nothing—only formlessness, chaos, and randomness. With it, plants and animals, the birds of the air and the fish of the sea, and every living thing come into being and an ecosystem takes shape.

God’s first act of love was to let light shine. With the coming of light, the story begins—the story of planet earth and human life. These verses place our lives in context. They connect us at the very deepest and essential level. They should cause us to exalt in the grandeur of our very being and make us profoundly humble and circumspect about our place and purpose. They should remind us that we human creatures are fully and absolutely related to a magnificent God. And when we embrace the great gift of life that this magnificent God has given us, we allow God’s light to shine in and through us. When we love others, even those who in their Manichean view of the world count us as enemies, we allow the light of God to shine, dispelling the darkness, “melting the clouds of sin and sadness, driving the dark of doubt away.”

What does this have to do with theological education? At San Francisco Theological Seminary, we provide the kind of educational experience that helps students overcome their tendency toward a Manichean, dualistic view of life and the world, opens them to the beauty and truth of God’s amazing love for God’s creation in all its splendid diversity, and urges them to adopt a more expansive understanding of their task and vocation as religious leaders. We want SFTS graduates to be prophetic, drum majors for justice. We want them to be healers of the world, repairers of the breach. We want them to pursue peace—not the peace of cemeteries, but the peace of a world redeemed and relationships restored. We don’t turn out firebrands to scorch the earth. We seek to kindle bearers of the Light.

And so we sing: “Giver of Immortal Gladness, fill us with the Light of Day.”

Joyfully,



Rev. Dr. James L. McDonald
President and Professor of Faith & Public Life

P.S. – As we begin the New Year, I am so grateful to each of you for your enthusiasm for the future of SFTS and your generous support of its programs. As always, I extend to you the invitation to be in touch with me with your comments, questions, and suggestions. I can be reached at (415) 451-2812 or jmcdonald@sfts.edu.

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