

“Light up the Darkness”¹

“It all started when God said, light up the darkness ... and our lives were filled up with the light of Christ.”

A Sermon

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Over the years, I’ve noticed that graduations evoke a variety of expected and, sometimes unexpected, emotions. Today, we celebrate the graduation of several members of this congregation.² Four of them are with us in person and others are held tenderly in our hearts and minds. For them all, we share their sense of accomplishment and fulfillment. In graduation, we are given caps, gowns, diplomas and sometimes tassels and ribbons all of which express the singular truth that, “We’ve made it!” The moment is triumphant.

But this morning, having already received your long-anticipated diplomas, perhaps a change in terms might be instructive. The word “graduation,”³ however affirming, brings to mind something completed, accomplished, past. If you are like most High Schoolers that word spells blessed relief. But another word is equally *apropos*, with an altogether different inflection. The word “commencement,”⁴ which describes your academic achievement, with all the pomp and circumstance thereunto appertaining, also points ahead toward something yet to be. It envisions a panoply of possibilities.

All things considered, we’ve spent a lifetime graduating. At some point we gave up crawling around on the floor and commenced toddling. Then came walking and running and biking and finally driving, which is when we could really give our parents gray hair. We made our way from kindergarten to elementary school, then middle school, Jr. Hi. and High School. With each graduation, we started something new. We graduated to a new building, new teachers, new expectations and opportunities. And, for most of us, we then had to ask the next series of commencement questions: “What’s next?” “What do I do now?” “Where do I go from here?”

These questions are not only practical but theologically significant. In the last two Sundays, Dr. Keiffer and Rev. Schwartz have guided you through the Lectionary emphasis on Pentecost and the Trinity. Those themes continue the long story of salvation history and provide the fullest picture of what we think we know about the Great Universal Spirit.⁵ So, today, now that the story of God is complete, the focus is on each of us. Where do we go from here?

That question was pivotal throughout the history of Israel. Psalm 81 begins with a lofty pean of praise to the Almighty, but then changes direction completely when a voice is heard challenging the nation to shape up, to remember divine deliverance, and to focus on the worship of the one true God. The idea seems to be that the nation can only discern its future if it remembers how God has been a part of their formation.

In the Epistle for the morning, the apostle Paul seems to understand and, speaking of his own sense of identity and call, he became rather poetic. “It all started,” he wrote, “when God said, ‘*Light up the darkness ...*’ and,” as a result, “our lives were filled up with the light of Christ.” Therefore, he continued, “We’ve been ... battered by troubles, but we’re not demoralized; we’re not sure what to do, but God knows; we’ve been spiritually terrorized, but God hasn’t left our side.”⁶ We are upheld, preserved, and sent into the world as emissaries of God’s love to light up the darkness. That, my friends, is what’s next, which sounds for all the world like spiritual commencement. That is what you and I and all of us are called to do; to be

those who strive to light up the darkness *out there*, with the love and grace and acceptance we have experienced *in here*.

On a cold January night in 1941, in the frigid barracks of a German death camp, some of the most beautiful music ever composed was heard for the first time. Played on old instruments by inmates, it had been composed by another prisoner, a French Christian by the name of Olivier Messiaen. He said he wanted to create a composition that would proclaim, even in the terrors of ... [war], that the love and hope of God was still alive. He was inspired by a verse in the Book of Revelation, in which an angel announces, “time will be no more,” when all the broken, jagged, and seemingly hopeless aspects of human history will be redeemed.

He called his piece “The Quartet for the End of Time.” With constantly changing rhythms, the musicians have to pay exceptional attention to each other. He imagined bird song, rainbows, angels, and envisioned colors created by the notes, which he also described in the score. And, in addition to terms like, Crescendo, Legato, and Pizzicato, in the last movement, he directed the performers to: “Play tenderly, to play with ecstasy, to play with love.”⁷

I don’t think that we are actually living at the end of time, but some days it can feel like it. With brutal wars, frightful diseases, rampant incivility, and governmental gridlock, the path ahead for graduates, for any of us, can seem more than a little daunting. That’s why, on a day like today, or whenever we think about our lives and our future, we remember the light, we cling to the light, and seek to live as those who strive to light up every kind of darkness we encounter - with love.

In a recent Illinois College Baccalaureate Service, we heard a compelling address by Marie Owumi. She began, “6,118. That’s the number of miles it is from this location to my home in Lagos, Nigeria. 244. That is the number of days that I have spent since the death of my mother. People say, “Marie, you must be so brave ...” But coming here to college doesn’t feel like a frightening thing. So, am I ... brave? Not really. Am I uncomfortable? Absolutely.”

“But” she continued, “experts have discerned that being uncomfortable is a necessary tool for success. Artists and writers often create masterpieces as a means of dealing with a dark past ... Athletes thrive in competitive, uncomfortable environments. So, what is the recipe for courage?” she asked. “If being uncomfortable is a necessary first step ... *the next possible step has to be making other people uncomfortable* ... We live in a world where it is becoming increasingly easy to be selfish ... Making other people uncomfortable means striving for success, not only for yourself, but for ... other people as well.”

“We’re already making ... headway” she said. “Several youth are challenging the traditions of their parents; members of the LGBTQ+ community are owning their truth; consumers are becoming wise to the faults of big corporations and demanding a change.” People, young and old, are speaking out against war and in favor of peace. “Find your own little slice of courage,” Marie challenged, “find something you’re willing to fight for ...”

“One,” she concluded. “That’s it, that’s the most important number. One second. One person. One cause which can make a difference in someone else’s life.”⁸

On May 19, Ken Burns addressed the graduates of Brandeis University and made Marie’s advice even more specific. “Do good things,” he said. “Help others. Remember, the opposite of faith is not doubt. Doubt is central to faith. The opposite of faith is certainty.”

“Choose honor over hypocrisy, virtue over vulgarity ... character over cleverness, sacrifice over self indulgence. Denounce oppression everywhere.”⁹

To each of us today, no matter our age or stage or circumstance, as we commence into a new phase of life or simply into a new week of living, the questions are not so much, “Where am I going?” but, “What’s next? With whom shall I travel?” Above all, “What difference can I, can you, can we, make in our troubled world?” As we seek to answer those questions, let us remember that we can only rise to our fullest potential, if we strive to move beyond “common time”¹⁰ to God’s time, as we endeavor to live tenderly, with ecstasy, and always with love. And never forget that being uncomfortable in whatever comes next may be liberating.

Each day,
we are met by the king of the universe,
we are embraced by the unconditional grace of Christ,
we are renewed by the power of the holy spirit,
that we may be known as those who are willing to shine an eternal light
on every kind of darkness
in this awesome, needy world
which God so loves.

Amen

Notes:

1. From II Corinthians 4:5-12 in the translation, *The Message: The Bible in Contemporary Language* by Eugene H. Peterson, NavPress, 2005.
2. Those graduates include:
 - Melanie Angelo from Legend High School in Parker, CO. attending Arizona State University Honors College. Melanie is the granddaughter of Carolyn & Keith Beatty.
 - Rose Ballantyne, from SHS attending University of Missouri. Rose is the granddaughter of Nance and Chip Woodward.
 - Charlotte Beatty from RHS attending University of Kentucky. Charlotte is the granddaughter of Carolyn & Keith Beatty.
 - Matthew Bright from Macomb HS attending Monmouth College.
 - Ciarra Davis from LHS attending college TBD.
 - Finley DuBois from SHS attending Cosmetology School.
 - Kristianna Eastvold from SHS attending Calvin University.
 - Avaree Hack from Lakes Community High School in Lake Villa, IL attending the University of Iowa. Avaree is the granddaughter of Sandy Bellatti.
 - William Hovey from SHS attending the University of Arizona.
 - Benjamin Morgan from PPHS attending SIU Carbondale. Ben is the grandson of Rev. Jerry & Mrs. Judy Boutelle.
 - Sam Simonson from SHS attending the University of Illinois.
 - Henry Stutz from Oak Park River Forest HS attending Knox College. Henry is the grandson of Marty & Alan Stutz
3. Graduation – “the award or acceptance of an academic degree or diploma...” Merriam-Webster.
4. Commencement – “the ceremonies or the day for conferring degrees or diplomas” – “an act, instance, or time of commencing - to enter upon, to begin.” Merriam-Webster.
5. For some, this acronym stands for God, the Universe and Spirit, or God-Universe-Spirit. I rather like term Great Universal Spirit (GUS) as an apt reference to the Divine, which was recently used by Anne Lamott, in an April 23, 2024 lecture discussing her latest book, *Somehow: Thoughts on Love*, Riverhead Press, 2024.
6. II Corinthians 4 vs. 5 & 6

7. Unlike many composers, Messiaen had a condition called synesthesia, a rare ability to look at notes on a score and actually see colors. It was this gift, among so many others that enabled him to create such a remarkable masterpiece in such barren conditions.
8. For many years, there has been a long line of students from Nigeria, principally the Lagos area that have attended Illinois College. It was my privilege to spend a month in that region some years ago with the Rotary International Group Study Exchange program. On that trip, we were able to share the photos of the most recent graduation which also included students from Lagos. Marie, one of the more recent graduates, became a bright and shining star in her class.
9. Ken Burns' address is compelling for many reasons. But it was his remarks to the graduating class that I felt might resonate most clearly with today's graduates. He also said, "Try to change your own imperfections, but start with you. 'Nothing so needs reforming,' Mark Twain once chided us, 'as other peoples habits' ... Do not lose your enthusiasm. From it's Greek roots, the word simply means 'God in us.'"
10. Common time in musical notation is typically $4/4$ time or $2/2$ time, a regular, consistent and predictable time signature. Messiaen's work introduces complicated, unpredictable rhythms. In other words, he was masterfully thinking outside the box. Perhaps that's not a bad lens through which to consider our engagement with the world which requires uncommon care.