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Illumination

Have you ever had a really great party? I mean, a really fabulous party, maybe around Christmas or New Years, where you spent weeks getting ready and your house never looked better. And you had strings of lights all over the outside of the house and it just looked beautiful when people drove up. And you had candles lit throughout the house and the warm glow of their light made everything look that much more beautiful and special. And everybody had a wonderful time and no one got more drunk than they should have, but everybody was relaxed and laughed and left saying what a wonderful time they had? Christmas is kind of like a great party, isn't it? The season of lights, cutting through the darkness and it's all wonder, and fun, and celebration.

Epiphany, on the other hand, is like the morning after the party. Epiphany is coming downstairs with a searing winter sunrise cutting through the windows, illuminating all the dirty glasses and cigarette butts in the poinsettias and plates with half-eaten party food on them. Epiphany goes with the coming of the New Year, and is a time for painful, personal reflection and one more doomed attempt to get your act together. While the story of the little family coming to Bethlehem is filled with visits by angels and humble shepherds, the story of the wisemen following the star is bookended by the sinister character of Herod, whose desire to find and destroy the child introduces at least one of the elements behind Jesus' betrayal and execution 30 years in the future.

It is one of the brilliant tactics of the church that Christmas and Epiphany fall when they do. Christmas is matched with the winter solstice, a time of pagan revelry, with its evergreen trees symbolizing eternal life and its mistletoe for the kissing of beautiful girls or beautiful boys. The songs of Christmas are upbeat and make everyone smile. And for all of the attempts of various pious people to bring serious religiosity to the holiday—like Christmas cards and bumper stickers that poke you with: "Jesus is the Reason for the Season," etc., it remains a revel and we do well to enjoy it while we can.

Then there's Epiphany, hard on the heels of Christmas. Have you ever been to an Epiphany party? No! Of course not! Epiphany began as a twin celebration with Christmas which celebrated the birth, the coming of the Magi, the baptism of Jesus, and the miracle at Cana. In our culture, it has come to coincide with the New Year, a time when we make rash promises, and start Oprah's new diet, and get back to the business of our lives. Both Christmas and Epiphany are festivals of light, filled with celestial symbols and images of light. But while Christmas lights are festive and brightly colored, the lights of Epiphany are more light a 100 watt energy saver light bulb hanging down in the middle of the room.

I'll tell you what the light of Epiphany reminds me of. It reminds me of my first apartment here in Charlotte. I came to Charlotte as a recruit out of college to teach in the CMS schools. I moved here, not even knowing what school I would be teaching in, and found an apartment I thought I could afford. It was over on Wendover Rd., across from the Food Lion and had both of the amenities I sought: it had a pool and it allowed pets. When they said they allowed pets, I was thinking of the dog I planned to, and subsequently did, get. Bill the dog. Apparently, though, they also meant pets of a much smaller kind. The kind which greeted me with a thousand tiny footsteps each morning when I turned the lights on in my kitchen. That's right. Cockroaches. Now, I grew up in the mountains of VA primarily, and I don't know whether cockroaches don't like the mountains or what, but they were never a problem in the houses I grew up in. I certainly never saw them in the drawers with my silverware or in the cabinets with my cereal. In the mountains, you deal with ticks, which are nasty enough, but have the grace, mostly, the stay outside. Ticks I could probably have dealt with—many's the day when I was

growing up that I sat outside with my dog, a pair of pliers, and a jar of gasoline a whiled away a summer afternoon dealing with ticks. But cockroaches—they are another story.

And these weren't just any cockroaches. These were urban cockroaches who knew how to fight back. I would come in at 5:30 am to get my breakfast before facing a day at East Meck and when I turned the light on, there they'd be, scurrying around. I tried throwing stuff at them, but frankly, that was a no win situation. I mean, if you hit them, and they die, you've now got to deal with cockroach guts, and if you miss, well, now they've got a weapon! I had nightmares where they came into my room at night, turned on all the lights, and carried me away to the land of decaying Twinkies.

Well, thanks, Martha—thanks for that beautiful image. Nothing like a vision of cockroaches to inspire people to new life here at the beginning of the year! But, see, that's it—that's the dual job of Christmas and Epiphany—one lights the world with hope, peace, joy and love, and the other lights the world with reality. And really, you see, this is the first job of the church, of any faith. Let's put this in perspective. What is the first job of a doctor? See—you know this one. It's been on all those doctor shows. "First, do no harm." I learned that from a M*A*S*H episode when Hawkeye removes the healthy appendix of a colonel who was continually sending young men to die for his own glory. BJ objects to Hawkeye's actions because the first job of a doctor is "First, do no harm." That really should be the first job of any profession. What if that were the first job of lawyers? Or politicians? What if it were drummed into the heads of prospective ministers in seminary: "First, do no harm?" That might be good thing, don't you think?

So, what's the first job of a teacher? Harder, and ignored by a few teachers, but vital to the work: the first job of a teacher is "Find out what they don't know." I worked with many teachers who would come into the teacher's lounge saying, "I can't believe how ignorant these kids are. They didn't even know who Charlemagne was" or "what the Pythagorean theorem is" or something like that. I never said it, but I always thought, "Well, I think that's your job, isn't it? To find out what they don't know and teach it to them?" I have to admit, I had a pair of dimwitted girls one year who put me over the edge one day when one of them raised her hand and asked, "What country did we fight against in the Civil War?" Mmm. Yeah. We fought ourselves. That's what civil war means. No other countries involved. Still, it was my job to teach her and I did give her that information (although in her case, I seriously doubt whether she held onto it for more than a few seconds—kind of like Dory in "Finding Nemo").

So what is the first job of the church? Any ideas? I'll give you a hint—it is a pervasive image throughout the Bible, stated as often in the Old Testament as it is in the New. Give up? The first job of the church is to be light to the world. Oh, yeah! We knew that! Light to the world! Sure! We must have heard it 10 times in the last month alone: Isaiah 9:2—"The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of the shadow of death a light has dawned." It's a beautiful image, the light shining up on the hill for all to see—they are drawn to its beauty and we welcome them in—and we're all kind of glowing because we're filled with light. I sometimes think we treat the faith the way Doug Henning treated magic. Do you remember this guy? He was kind of the Barry Manilow of magic, and was sort of a buck-toothed Jesus look-alike with access to Elton John's wardrobe. He was a really good magician, but he always ruined the effect at the end of a trick by going, "It's magic!" Sometimes I think we treat our faith the same way—it's cute, and we like it, but it's a little goofy and frankly has wardrobe issues. But the truth is that being light to the world isn't some call to be above and beyond. It is a call to beauty and joy—that much is clear in the annual need for Christmas. But it is also a call to turn the lights on—to reveal the necessity to clean up after the party, to illuminate the cockroaches that are there whether the lights are on or not.

Paul knew this. He met it on the road to Damascus. When Jesus turned his lights on Paul, Paul went blind! And from the moment his sight is restored to him forward, Paul never shies away from that light—not for the rest of his life. He turns the light on the Jewish Christian community and points out to them their narrow-mindedness at insisting that Gentiles who wanted to become Christians had to

first get circumcised. He turns it on the churches he served. Read Galatians sometime. Paul let's them have it with both barrels for their in-fighting and their immorality. The letter to the Galatians is the equivalent, in Harry Potter terms, of a six-chapter howler, complete with raspberry. Most significantly, Paul turns the light on himself. He says, "I have all the credentials a person needs to be successful—I'm of the tribe of Benjamin with all the correct body parts, I'm a Pharisee, I zealously persecuted the church and I'm legally flawless. And," he says, "I count all that for σκουβαλον." Now, I don't know how many of you speak Greek, but if you did, you'd be appalled that I used that word from the pulpit. It is most often translated in our Bibles as "rubbish," but that misses the emotional content of the word Paul chose to use. Paul was actually a fairly accomplished Greek scholar, and he picked a particular word to use here. I'll give you a hint as to its emotional power. If they had had bumper stickers in the 1st century, they might have had one that said, "Skubalon happens." It is a word that when Paul dictated it to his secretary from prison, made the young man blush and say, "You can't write 'skubalon' in the letter to the Philippians! What if they read it out loud?! What will Phoebe say?!" It is a word with some bite to it, which is so powerful that if I said its Anglo-Saxon equivalent here today, no one would be able to think of anything else for the rest of the service and I would lose my job. Get the picture? He says, "I've taken a good look at myself and all that stuff that I thought made me ok, that made me stand out from the crowd as special and protected, I now see that it is all skubalon—that everything that is good and righteous about me comes from my faith in Christ and not from myself."

Do you remember the book *I'm Ok, You're OK*? It was published in 1969 by Thomas A. Harris, MD and was one of the most popular books of the 1970's. It brought an important message to our culture—one that had been missing for quite some time. I didn't read the book—I was a kid at the time—but it so pervaded the culture that I got the message, too—I just got it through Mr. Rogers, who told me, "I like you just the way you are." It was a good message. I was glad Mr. Rogers liked me just the way I was. Certainly the other kids in school did not feel that way—they saw multiple problems with me and were fairly vocal about what they saw. So it was good for there to be a cultural movement that began to tell people that no matter their race or their economic status or their sexual orientation, they were ok. The movement was so powerful that the current generation of young people doesn't even have to think about it—it is ingrained in them that everyone is ok the way they are. They are much better than previous generations in this regard and much kinder to each other, in this regard, as a result. Unfortunately, like all good things, this movement has a downside, which is that it is now translated into the philosophy, "It's all good." And while our faith teaches us that we are infinitely valuable to God just because God made us, our faith does not say, "It's all good." In fact, the light that our faith illuminates in our lives is not that we're ok, but that we are not ok.

Why not? Why not? Surely we're the good people, aren't we? We're the ones who go to church every Sunday! We take care of the children and the elderly, we feed the hungry and house the homeless, we study our Bibles and say our evening prayers, we are good, good people! And our credentials—whoa! We got children of ministers, and children of ministers of music—we got Baptist credentials in education and we got credentials in politics! We got people with high education, higher education and highest education! Who is better than we are? It's like that parable that Jesus told—one I first found disturbing when it was handed to me in a children's book when I was a child. A guy does *well* on his farm—he has a good year. He fills up his silos, then he plans to build bigger ones, because he's done so well. And get this—the minute he does that, the minute he plans to sock things away and rest on his laurels, God says, "Idiot. This night your life is demanded of you." In the children's book, he's lying there in bed, with his silos gleaming outside in the moonlight, and he's got this dumbstruck look on his face. I always thought that was so unfair—what did he do to deserve to die and lose everything? He was a good guy, a good farmer, and he didn't hurt anybody. He turned the light off, that's what he did. He pretended that he was ok—that he could sit back and take care of himself and he owed nothing to God.

I'll tell you how I know we're not ok. I moved to Charlotte in 1985. I took a job teaching English at East Mecklenburg High School, which at the time had 2400 students in three grades. I had 3 days to get ready for the first day of classes, during which time I had to find my own textbooks and go to countless, pointless meetings, one of which was solely to instruct me on where to put my trashcan in the classroom. I began teaching in late August and was already in trouble by early September, when I missed school to go to a friend's wedding and, during the day, my students set fire to the porch of my trailer with firecrackers. I cut my finger on a jar in October (long story involving Bill the dog) and missed more days for surgery and recovery. I returned to absolute chaos. By February, I discovered a great truth about myself and my career—I hated my students. I hated them. And it was equal-opportunity hatred. I hated the rocker boys who came in with their long hair and one pierced ear and proceeded to make smart remarks about everything I said. I hated the boys who fell asleep in class and got angry with me when I woke them up. In particular, I hated the girls. I hated the white girls, who sneered and called me names behind my back. I hated the black girls, who sneered and called me names to my face. I didn't know quite when it happened, but sometime between August and February we had become adversaries and all I knew at that point was I didn't want anything more to do with them. I decided I preferred the mind-numbing boredom of office work to the open hostility I found in the classroom. So I called my mom. I told her I was quitting. She thought I meant after that year, and started talking about alternatives. I said, No—I'm quitting now. Tonight. As in, I'm never walking into that expletive deleted trailer again. She said, Oh. And then, in her wisdom, she began to tell me about myself. She said things like, I had felt God calling me to the classroom. Well, skubalon.

I hadn't really invited God into the equation up to that point. I had not really found a church in Charlotte—hadn't really tried all that hard to be honest. So, when I found out about an old friend from Richmond who went to Carmel Baptist, I began going to church with her. And I began inviting God in again. And just like that, I began to love my students. Oh, I don't mean like you see in the movies, where they started coming over to my apartment and we hung out together. I mean, gradually, I began to find real, honest things to teach them about and they began to listen. I did an entire month on African-American literature, which I love. I read them Paul Laurence Dunbar—"We wear the mask that grins and lies/ we smile, but oh great Christ our cries/ to thee from tortured souls arise/ We wear the mask." I taught them plays and made them memorize scenes and act them out. But here is the light that came on for me that year. On my own, I could not love those children. I found them annoying at best, and contemptible at worst. I was well on my way to becoming like one of the other English teachers at East Meck, who had her students pick up a worksheet from one box when they walked in and turn it in in another box when they walked out. And she only spoke to them to send them out of her classroom. I was inches away from abandoning anything I had to offer them in favor of some job where I could avoid the unwashed masses. I was not ok. The light that came on for me that year is that I am not ok without God. I cannot love, I cannot help, I cannot survive without God.

And I have great credentials—at least as good as Paul's, and up there with anyone in this congregation. As for being Baptist, my father is a Baptist minister and my roots go back on my mother's side to Roger Williams' family. As for education, I went to one of the best schools in the country; as for spirituality, I was baptized at 9, acted as senior youth pastor, and only took 44 years to become ordained. And all of it, ALL OF IT, counts for skubalon.

We have a lot to face in the coming year. And we can rest on our excellent credentials and sit in the darkness if we want to. But the first job of the church is to turn the light on. Our country will have a new president and our state a new governor. It is our job to keep the light on so they can see where they are going astray (and I guarantee you they will go astray). This city is going to have many challenges, perhaps greater financial challenges than it has had in decades. And we will need to keep the light on so they can see the neglected neighborhoods and, most importantly, the hurting and forgotten people. And, equally as important, our challenge as a church is to keep the light on for ourselves. We at this church have incredible challenges this year, too—we must have a light so that we

do not sink into manipulations and pettiness to get our own agendas. We must hold the light up to ourselves, individually, so that what we bring to each other is the best we have to give, and not just the first response our emotions throw out. We must hold the light up to ourselves and force ourselves to think the unthinkable: “Wow! I could be the one who is wrong!” The very best gift we can give ourselves in this new year is not a diet or an exercise program or even a resolution to have a devotion every day. The best gift would be to get out that 100 watt bulb and turn it on ourselves—find the meannesses, find the doubts, find the despair, find the callousness—take a nice, long personal inventory. Then take a deep breath and tell ourselves, “I’m not ok.” And that is the point at which God can step in and say, “I know—and I love you anyway.” This is the great message we have to give the world—not, “We’re ok, come in and let us fix you!” but “You’re not ok? Hey, we’re not ok either! But God loves us anyway!”

There are many lessons of Epiphany, but one of them is that if you keep your eyes open, and pay attention to that which wishes to destroy you, you can avoid it by going home the other way. It is the brilliance of Christmas that each year we are reminded of our preciousness to God, that we can celebrate a God who loved us so much he sent his only son to us as a fragile new-born baby. It is the brilliance of Epiphany that we are sent back out into the world and told that in a world filled with darkness, we are allowed to bring a light.