

Children of the Light

We have entered the season of Epiphany. This is the portion of the church year in which we celebrate that Jesus is the Light of the World. A Light that shines in the darkness and a Light that can never be extinguished. A Light that came into the world to fulfill the law. A Light that came into the world offering us salvation, hope, and abundant life. A Light that came into the world to make God's love incarnate.

Jesus, however, turns incarnation upside down and teaches his followers a quite different message. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus says we are the light of the world (Matthew 5:13-16). Eugene Peterson, in *The Message*, puts it this way:

"Jesus says, 'We are to be salt-seasoning, bringing out the God-flavors of the earth.' Jesus says, 'We are here to be light, bringing out the God-colors in this world.'"

Jesus teaches that we are the light to help us understand there are two parts to the mystery of incarnation. There is the mystery of God becoming flesh in Jesus Christ—the Light coming into the world in human form, in flesh and blood. And, there is the mystery of God living within us, through the gift of the Holy Spirit. That we, too, become the light of the world. This second incarnation of God's extravagant love and grace happens through our flesh and blood, our hands and feet, our words and actions. This is the centerpiece of Jesus' prayer for his disciples recorded in John 17—that God may be with us as God is in Jesus. From the beginning, it was a part of God's plan that all who follow Christ would become a part of the light of the world.

On December 12, Char and I were privileged to be present for the birth of our new granddaughter, Hazel Olivia Ough—as we were for the previous births of our four other grandchildren.

Although I was sixth in line for holding and rocking privileges—behind two proud parents, two possessive grandmothers, and the other grandfather—I still managed several hours of cradling the little Hazel-miracle in my arms. As I did with each of my other grandchildren at their births, I prayed that God's eyes would be on Hazel night and day and sang to her one of my favorite hymns:

"I want to walk as a child of the light.
I want to follow Jesus.
God set the stars to give light to the world.
The star of my life is Jesus.
In him there is no darkness at all.
The night and the day are both alike.
The Lamb is the light of the city of God.

Shine in my heart, Lord Jesus.”

The United Methodist Hymnal #206

My heart’s desire is that Hazel (and each of my grandchildren) will walk as a child of the Light as she grows in stature and matures in spirit. I believe this is also the desire of God’s heart for each human being.

I also believe this is God’s heart-song for each of our congregations and the entire United Methodist witness across the Dakotas-Minnesota Area. We are called to walk as children of the Light.

Jesus taught, “Let your light shine before others so that they may see your good works and give glory to your God in heaven” (Matthew 5:16). And, the prophet Isaiah reminds us that when we seek God’s heart and pursue God’s justice, light shall break forth like the dawn and healing shall spring up quickly and our light shall rise in the darkness (Isaiah 58:8, 10).

I pray each day that every United Methodist congregation in Minnesota and the Dakotas will be a light rising in the darkness of injustice, hopelessness, fear, cynicism, and sin. A light rising in the darkness to build the capacity of Christ’s followers to love God and neighbor. A light rising in the darkness to reach new people for Christ. A light rising in the darkness to heal and transform a broken world.

I rejoice in the countless United Methodist lay and clergy leaders across the area that daily walk as children of the Light. I thank God for those congregations and communities across the area that are sources of light rising in the darkness.

When the congregations of the Minnesota Conference set out to pack 1 million meals for hungry children and end up packing more than 3 million meals, then our light rises in the darkness.

When the 25-member Tolstoy UMC in western South Dakota, a community of 37, sends 13 kids to camp, then our light rises in the darkness.

When more than a dozen churches in northern Minnesota create hundreds of item-filled shoeboxes for children of the Leech Lake Indian Reservation who might not otherwise receive a Christmas gift, then our light rises in the darkness.

When our Bakken Outreach Ministry in Watford City, North Dakota gathers 95 persons for a Christmas celebration service and 50 of them are children, then our light rises in the darkness.

When Balaton United Methodist Church partners with a nearby Lutheran church and the joint Wednesday evening program brings up to 200 children and adults in the 600-person town, then our light rises in the darkness.

When Embrace Church in Sioux Falls, South Dakota is named one of the fastest growing churches in the United States reaching over 3,000 people weekly and launching a new campus in a few weeks, then our light rises in the darkness.

I invite you to begin this new year by renewing your commitment to join with me in praying for Holy Spirit breakthroughs. Pray that each child born into this world will walk as a child of Light. Pray that the Lord Jesus will shine in your heart. Pray that our congregations will break forth like the dawn and become lights rising in the darkness. Pray that we will “bring out the God-colors in this world.”

“I want to walk as a child of the light...
The star of my life is Jesus...
Shine in my heart, Lord Jesus.”

Bruce R. Ough is resident bishop of the Dakotas-Minnesota Episcopal Area of The United Methodist Church.