

The Light of the World

There are echoes in this morning's gospel reading of the first chapter of Genesis: "In the beginning, God..." The biblical creation story starts with God creating heaven and earth by literally calling them into being. "Let there be light," he commanded, to kick things off. First comes the word, then the thing itself. But why start with light? Here's how that great biblical scholar, Groucho Marx, explained it: "In the beginning, there was nothing. Then God said, 'Let there be light.' Of course, there was still nothing, but now you could see it." So why did the Lord start with light? How else could he see what he was doing?

A photographer must be a student of light. Granted, you can set your camera on automatic these days and bang away without giving it much heed. But most likely you will wind up with a generic shot. This can be perfectly appropriate, given the right lighting conditions. But if you really want to do justice to your subject in every light, you need to use your camera's built-in light meter. Then you make the necessary adjustments in exposure and lens aperture. After all, the word "photography" literally means "writing with light," which suggests you should understand the medium you are working in.

As a landscape photographer, I mostly work with natural light, which varies dramatically according to weather conditions, season and time of day. I quickly realized that if I was going to shoot outdoors, I needed to get up early. The quality of the light soon after sunrise (as well as at dusk) is particularly conducive to outdoor photography. The sun is lower to the horizon, and its light travels farther in the atmosphere. This brings out warmer tones on the color spectrum, reds and yellows, while blues are more diffused. The result is softer light and a golden glow that flatters everything it falls upon. Also, photographers are able to shoot directly into the sun, which at any other time of day would result in a blown-out image.

We can thank the Impressionists for the insight that they were rendering light first and only secondarily the objects that light shines on. Once they began painting outdoors, they realized just how changeable lighting conditions could be outside the studio. With his Haystacks series in the late 1880s, Claude Monet began painting the same subject matter under varying lighting and weather conditions. He often worked on multiple canvasses in succession at different times of day as the sun moved across the sky. For his series depicting the cathedral at Rouen, he set up his canvases side-by-side in rented space by the front window of a lingerie shop across the street. He worked from dawn to dusk over two years (1892 and 1893) on ten paintings in succession. He captured sun and shadow playing across the pale stone façade in brilliant yellows, reds, oranges and blues. He thereby demonstrated how transformative it can be to depict the same scene in a different light.

Light has long been a metaphor for spiritual transformation. Moses saw a light: a bush that burned but was not consumed. He turned aside to see, and his life took a radically different turn. St. Paul was blinded by a light from heaven as he traveled to Damascus, and he quickly joined forces with those he had been persecuting. Jesus Christ was the light, according to various gospel accounts. He told his disciples, "I am the light of the world." This was not just a metaphor. At one point, Jesus and three of his disciples ascended a tall mountain where "he was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his garments became white as light." This episode became known as the Transfiguration.

An archetypal event of this type occurred in the Gospel of Luke. A radiant figure appeared to shepherds in Bethlehem to announce the birth of the Christ child. A multitude of the heavenly host sang, "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among men with whom he is pleased!" The narrative noted that "the glory of the Lord shone around them, and [the shepherds] were filled with fear."

Fear seems to be the dominant emotion when biblical figures encounter light from another world. The Old Testament prophet Isaiah had a vision of God on his throne as angels cried, "Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory." Isaiah reacted with dismay. "Oh woe is me," he cried. "I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips..." Similarly, when told that he could not look upon God's face and live, Moses hid himself in the cleft of a rock on Mt. Sinai as the Lord passed by. Even God's reflected glory on his face was enough to send the Hebrew people fleeing in terror when Moses came down from the mountain.

The German theologian Rudolph Otto coined the term "numinous" to characterize such events, from the Latin *numen*, signifying a divine power. The Eastern Orthodox use the term "uncreated light" to describe these transfigurations, in contrast to the natural light I work with as a landscape photographer. According to St. Gregory Palamas, a 14th-century Greek monk and theologian, uncreated light exists in the eye of the beholder. He wrote, "Take note that eyes with natural vision are blind to that light," he said. "It is invisible, and those who behold it do so not simply with their bodily eyes, but with eyes transformed by the power of the Holy Spirit."

Numinous experiences are often described as "otherworldly." But as Jesus made clear when he proclaimed the coming of God's kingdom, he wasn't talking about another world. He meant this one, the world as God created it. When Jesus said, "I came into this world that those who do not see may see," he had more in mind than the recovering of sight to those who were born physically blind.

From the moment he first wandered out of the wilderness to begin his ministry, his message was always the same. “Repent, he said, “for the kingdom of God is at hand.” By “repent,” Jesus meant something far more radical than merely renouncing sin. The literal meaning of “repent,” or *metanoia* in the original Greek of the New Testament, is a change of mind. It’s not simply to think different thoughts or to act differently but to see the world with new eyes. The change Jesus had in mind was so absolute that he likened it to being reborn. “Unless one is born anew,” Jesus told people, “he cannot see the kingdom of God.”

If the kingdom has come, as Jesus said, why don’t we see it? The short answer is that we are looking in all the wrong places. We assume that finding God’s kingdom requires a change of scenery, either in this world or in the next. The last place we would ever think to look is right here, which is the only place we will ever find it. “The man who is often thinking that it is better to be somewhere else than where he is excommunicates himself,” Thoreau declared. We can take “excommunicate” in this case to mean separating oneself from God’s presence. In the end, we don’t need a change of scenery. We just need to see things in a different light.

Amen.