

Sermon: Sun of God
Scripture: Psalm 113
Preacher: Rev. Will Burhans
Date: October 25, 2015

One of our favorite places for vacation as a family is my parents' house in Sandbridge, which is just south of Virginia Beach. When we are there we often take wonderfully long walks down the beach looking for sea-shells and signs of porpoise out in the sea and romp around in the surf. There was one particular morning a number of years ago when the girls were much younger when we were there in the spring. The water was still pretty frigid and our family was out early walking down the beach and we began playing a game where you choose a spot to stand and the person who chose the best spot was determined by who could get the foamy water the very closest to their bare toes when a wave came in without the water actually touching you.

And so we were all standing there on the shore facing the open ocean and the rising sun still low in the sky just above that thin slice of the ocean's horizon. And I, at one point having found my feet fully engulfed in the water rushing the shore, looked out and noticed that most beautiful golden glittering pathway that the sun makes across the water.

But the thing that struck me as I was standing there was that the sun was not just making a path of searing golden light across the ocean and to us in general but the path made a perfectly straight line directly and exactly to ME. And as I looked down the beach at Tracy standing there mesmerized by the same scene, I thought to myself "I wonder if she is seeing this, that the sun is making its path directly to me! This must be why she married me!" And so I walked over to her and of course the sunlight path on the ocean followed me perfectly and I stood there waiting for her to turn to me and say – "my beloved, the one for whom the sun rises!" but instead she said – "excuse me, you're blocking the sun from me." And I realized that she sees the sun's golden pathway of light in a direct line exactly and perfectly directed towards her! And that there could be thousands of people standing along that beach for miles north and miles south looking out at that sun and they would experience that path of light coming directly and perfectly toward them. It truly is in the eyes of the beholder.

We talked about this at the Platypus men's group on Wednesday morning, always an interesting and lively discussion, about how much our perception determines our perspective and what is objective reality and what is simply perceived to be reality. And the men there figured it all out as we always do with all the topics we discuss, so you'll have to ask one of them the answer to what is real and what is truth! That's where I was reminded of this story and how apt an analogy the stream of Golden light from the sun is for our relationship with God.

The image the sun for the divine works on a number of levels. First of all we claim in our religious tradition that we can be in relationship with the Divine and that relationship is a personal and intimate one. You can speak metaphorically of swimming in the ocean and the divine as the ocean in which we are immersed, a massive impersonal but buoying presence but that does not capture the personal relationship – between I and Thou - that is central to the Judeo-Christian concept of God. It's more like this experience of the sun's light beam across the ocean, that somehow God's love is focused upon each of us personally and completely. Often our direct experience of God's presence comes as an experience of being loved – as John Wesley named it: “I felt my heart strangely warmed” - and while we know the enormity of this love out of which creation was born, we also know the intimacy of it and that in some amazing way God's love really is directed directly towards us. This is what our tradition holds out for: a very personal and even intimate relationship with the Divine. Jesus said that if God cares for the lilies of the field how much more for each of us. And Jesus invited us to refer to God as a parent: our father. And as a parent God loves us and delights in our uniqueness and our gifts and even our quirks and failings and flailings such that if we were to behold God we would experience God's love and light focused upon us, just like that path of light warming our souls. That's a beautiful thing... AND it can be a problem.

Because the temptation that I illustrated at the outset with my story is to experience that path of light and love from God and to believe it to be uniquely ours to the exclusion of others... or at least as the bumper sticker says that you might have seen: “Jesus loves you, but I am his favorite!” And this I think has been the shadow side of the Judeo-Christian insistence that God is a personal God and seeks to love and save us individually. The experience can be so powerful of God's intimate love for us that if we

can misunderstand that it is directed toward us exclusively! I mean, it looked to me as though the sun's light was directed to me alone and when I looked down the beach at everybody else it did not look like the pathway was near them at all. When we all got together in a huddle – which we did once we began talking about this - or stood one behind another then it was coming to all of us but when we were further apart it was not evident. And haven't Christians been convinced of this over the ages, that God's light and love – because we have Jesus as our Lord and Savior – is directed towards us and us alone and so everyone else needs to come over here and get behind us or join us so that they too can experience the power of God's light and love. I mean for the most part we have certainly meant well by it.

But all along the light and love of God is streaming down upon each of us and all of us without exception. Jesus said “love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you for God makes his sun to rise on the righteous and the unrighteous and sends rain on the just and the unjust alike.” So many of the Psalms, while they can at times be prayers for the Hebrew people against others, there are so many that make it clear that God and God's love extends beyond boundaries of nation and race. Listen again to pieces of Psalm 113: “The Lord is exalted over all the nations, his glory above the heavens! Who is like our God who stoops to look on the heavens and the earth!” So there's this immense cosmic greater-than-the-sun-like quality to the one we are naming God but then listen to what the Psalmist says: “He raises the poor from the dust and lifts the needy from the trash heap.” Talk about intimate and personal! From the heights of heaven to the lowest lows of humanity, God's love extends. Remember these are the songs that Jesus would have sung, the Psalms are. And its exactly these sentiments that Jesus pulls out and emphasizes – the breaking through of all boundaries of exclusion to clarify God's love is for all, all of God's children, regardless of race or nationality or religion! God's sun shines for all.

But would it if we were not there to receive it? You know the age-old question – “would a falling tree in a forest make a sound if we weren't there to hear it”? We could ask similarly, would there be a path at all of sunlight across the ocean if we weren't there to witness it? Or would there be God's love at all if there weren't an objective other to receive it and experience it? And could that be a reason in itself for our very existence -

to be a receptacle of this Love that God must give, a receptacle and then a conduit or bearer of such love? In other words God created us in order to have someone to bestow love upon... but let's not be anthropocentric here but let's say God created *the world* itself out of love to have something to love and something to return that love back to Him. Again the Psalmist sings it best from Psalm 148: Let heaven and earth praise the Lord our God, the seas and all that moves in them! Praise him sun and moon! Praise him stars and waters below! Praise him lightning and hail, snows and stormy winds! Praise him mountains and hills, wild animals and cattle, small creatures and flying birds! Praise him young men and women, old men and children! Creation was birthed out of love and returns that love back to her creator.

Just as our gardens grow with the light of the sun warming and nurturing them, encouraging them towards the light, so too have we been created to be grown in the light of God. We are dependent upon the light of God's love to grow into the beings we were created to be. We are free though and have the ability to turn ourselves away from this light to some extent – we can go inside to dark isolated places and as a result not then receive and bear the fruit that we are mean to receive and bear in our lives. So the question is how do we, then, open ourselves to the light of God? In what ways spiritually do we stand facing the rising of the sun and sense that path of light directed towards us and receive the warmth and nutrients that God offers us? What are the ways we turn our backs on the light or walk down into the cellars of ourselves and forget to even desire the light of God or fear that light?

For at times it feels safer to remain insulated and isolated, to manage things ourselves, to just stay contained and managing our own little cellars and not be vulnerable to others rather than to step out into the open, raise our eyes to the light of God and receive the love and connections and openings that God wants to grant us for our growth, growth that God wants for all of us the good and the bad alike, the just and the unjust, for if we are not growing then we are not fully alive and as the second century theologian Iraneaus said – “the glory of God is the human being fully alive!” How then are we called to step out into the light, to be vulnerable enough to receive what God wants to give to us? How can we turn ourselves and face fully that pathway of light that is cutting across the ocean of our lives to bless us with grace?

The Sui poet Hafiz says: “How did the rose ever open its heart and give to this world all its beauty? It felt the encouragement of light against its being; otherwise, we all remain too frightened.” It felt the encouragement of light against its being and gave to the world its beauty. Let us open ourselves to the light of God so that we will more fully become the conduits of love that we were made to be and in the end we’ll go peacefully along that golden path of sunlight and be welcomed into the eternal light and love of God. I’d like to ask my daughter Naomi up to help me end with a word of God’s promise offered in song:

Sandbridge

Forge a way with me, where there seems to be none.
There’s the sun rising over the sea.

All the shadows cast, by a night’s imagination
Will disappear as the day begins to be.

At the ocean’s watch, there’s no need for explanation
Let yourself, be carried through, the water’s cold.

You will see that land, once you push from the shoreline.
It will lighten your body and warm your soul.

All is blue, You’ll be seen through,
To where everything is new, All is blue.

We’ll wait there for you. No need to fix us in your mind
The heart contains, the bonds that hold, us true

So keep that picture framed, But don’t you fear or fail to love
Cause love will forge the way and see you through.