

Good morning. When I was a younger man I had a friend who was a poet. I hope each of you either is a poet in other people's lives or have one in your own. Individuals who can order words into beauty are mathematicians of emotion. They can reveal truths that might otherwise lie unexpressed or even unguessed at in the human heart.

One Christmas maybe 50 years ago this poet friend sent out a card that captured the life-giving promise of even the tiniest flame in world that is cold and dark. I'll read it to you now.

*"Will It Burn?"* by Richard Aldridge

From out of the cold  
And snow the whole day  
We've come to this hut  
By what lucky turn  
Not either one knows  
And now having shut  
Out the storm we both stand  
In stiff frozen clothes  
Till seeing an old  
Stove we stir and lay  
In some paper and wood  
Then matchbox in hand  
Both think: Will it burn?  
And then, Will it hold?  
Not, Is the stove good?  
Or Will the hut fold?

As the poem describes, people of every place and time, including our own, have suffered periods of cold and darkness. They have craved the two gifts that light (like the light of our chalice) provides: vision and warmth.

Vision arises from the clarity of reason and intuition, and warmth from love through fellowship. Reason tells us what we see and intuition where to look. Love draws us together through the understanding that without each other we are nothing.

The poem asks the question, Will It Burn? The answer this morning is You bet. Let there be light!

The perplexing relationship between light and darkness has been of interest to us humans for a very long time. Consider the following:

From the Jewish Torah, Genesis 1:1-5:

### **The Beginning**

**1** In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. **2** Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters. **3** And God said, "Let there be light," and there was light. **4** God saw that the light was good, and he separated the light from the

darkness. <sup>5</sup> God called the light “day,” and the darkness he called “night.” And there was evening, and there was morning—the first day.

According to modern scholars, Genesis was first composed in the Middle East sometime between 2500 and 3000 years ago, but it undoubtedly sprang from an oral tradition older than that.

A third of the way around the globe from Judaea, also about 3000 years ago, in the Indus Valley of India, we find among the first Vedic hymns written in Sanskrit the following:

*Then even nothingness was not, nor existence,  
There was no air then, nor the heavens beyond it.  
What covered it? Where was it? In whose keeping  
Was there then cosmic water, in depths unfathomed?*

*At first there was only darkness wrapped in darkness.  
All this was only unilluminated water.  
That One which came to be, enclosed in nothing,  
arose at last, born of the power of heat.*

*That One was the body of Light.*

Now let's skip ahead 5000 years and see what modern physicists, foremost among them Stephen Hawking, say about the origin of light 14 billion years ago:

“So where did this light — the first light in the Universe — first come from? It didn't come from stars, because it predates the stars. It wasn't emitted by atoms, because it predates the formation of neutral atoms in the Universe. If we continue to extrapolate backwards to higher and higher energies, we find some strange things out: thanks to Einstein's  $E = mc^2$ , these quanta of light could interact with one another, spontaneously producing particle-antiparticle pairs of matter and antimatter!”

If this modern version of these two earlier ancient intuitions is true, then in a very real sense before man began searching for light, light had been searching for man—among other things—for a very long time to bring us and everything else into existence.

For Christians this season celebrates the birth of light arriving in the person of that frailest human form—an infant, so tiny, so insignificant, so easily unnoticed. For non-Christians this Christmas story also carries significance and an accumulation of wisdom from across the history of humankind.

Let's look at Matthew 4:16 again:

“The people who were sitting in darkness saw a great light, and those who were sitting in the land and shadow of death, upon them a light dawned.”

The phrase "sitting in darkness" calls to mind two important precursors to the Christian era. Both of these individuals pictured the people of their day sitting in a semi-darkness of self-delusion, illuminated by false lights.

In northern India a young prince saw the suffering of the human spirit caused by a blindness to reality and he began a religious practice which would lead to "nirvana", a Sanskrit word which means a "final extinguishing", a blowing out of the shadowy candle lights of pride, greed, anger, and the like. This path, the Buddha promised, would lead to a true "enlightenment," an awakening that would allow men to live in peace both within themselves and with each other.

At almost the same moment in human history in Greece Plato described the semi-darkness that imprisoned human consciousness. In the "Allegory of the Cave", Plato describes human understanding as people sitting in a darkened cave looking at shadows of pottery figures cast up on the cave wall by the light of small fire set in front of them. He said that those sitting here believe that the shadows are real. A man of reason, Plato said that escape from this unreality required extinguishing the man-made firelight, leaving the artificial dolls behind and climbing up and out of the cave and into the sunlight of reality.

--Buddha, Plato, Jesus of Nazareth: three vanguards of the greatest battle for all of us, for all of humankind—leaving the semi-darkness of prejudices, traditions and false certainties and coming into the light.

All this talk of light and darkness has gotten, well, a little dark. Don't you think? Let's take a break and let a little humor shine in.

**After God created 24 hours of alternating darkness and light**, one of the angels asked him, "what are you going to do now?" God said, "I think I'm going to call it a day."

**My children are my light in the darkness**...that they caused.

**Hello darkness my old friend**...I've come to talk to you about your car's extended warranty.

**2 bats were sitting on a bench in the middle of the night** and one turns to the other and says, "I'm really thirsty for some blood". So he goes off into the darkness. After a while he comes back with his mouth full of blood and the second bat says "Wow! where did you get so much blood in the middle of the night?!" The first bat says, "Do you see that lantern pole there?" "Yes" responds the second bat. "Well I didn't" says the first bat.

**A helicopter with a pilot and a single passenger was flying around above Seattle** when a malfunction disabled all of the aircraft's navigation and communications equipment. Due to the darkness and haze, the pilot could not determine the helicopter's position and course to get back to the airport. The pilot saw a tall building with lights on and flew toward it, the pilot had the passenger draw a handwritten sign reading, "WHERE AM I?", and hold it up for the building's occupants to see. People in the building quickly responded to the aircraft, drew a large sign, and held it in a building window. Their sign said, "YOU ARE IN A HELICOPTER." The pilot smiled, waved, looked at his map,

determined the course to steer to SEATAC airport, and landed safely. After they were on the ground, the passenger asked the pilot how the "YOU ARE IN A HELICOPTER" sign helped determine their position. The pilot responded, "I knew that had to be the Microsoft support building, they gave me a technically correct but entirely useless answer."

**A doctor goes out and buys the best car on the market, a brand-new Ferrari GTO.** It is also the most expensive car in the world, and it costs him \$500,000. He takes it out for a spin and stops at a red light. An old man on a moped, looking about 100 years old, pulls up next to him. The old man looks over at the sleek shiny car and asks, "What kind of car ya got there, sonny?" The doctor replies, "A Ferrari GTO. It cost half a million dollars!" "That's a lot of money," says the old man. "Why does it cost so much?" "Because this car can do up to 250 miles an hour!" states the doctor proudly. The moped driver asks, "Mind if I take a look inside?" No problem," replies the doctor. So the old man pokes his head in the window and looks around. Then, sitting back on his moped, the old man says, "That's a pretty nice car, all right, but I'll stick with my moped!" Just then the light changes, so the doctor decides to show the old man just what his car can do. He floors it, and within 30 seconds, the speedometer reads 150 mph. Suddenly, he notices a dot in his rear-view mirror – what it could be...and suddenly...WHHHOOOOOOSSSSHHH! Something whips by him going much faster! "What on earth could be going faster than my Ferrari?" the doctor asks himself. He floors the accelerator and takes the Ferrari up to 175 mph. Then, up ahead of him, he sees that it's the old man on the moped! Amazed that the moped could pass his Ferrari, he gives it more gas and passes the moped at 210 mph. WHOOOOOOOSH HHHH! He's feeling pretty good until he looks in his mirror and sees the old man gaining on him AGAIN! Astounded by the speed of this old guy, he floors the gas pedal and takes the Ferrari all the way up to 250 mph. Not ten seconds later, he sees the moped bearing down on him again! The Ferrari is flat out, and there's nothing he can do! Suddenly, the moped plows into the back of his Ferrari, demolishing the rear end. The doctor stops and jumps out and, unbelievably, the old man is still alive. He runs up to the mangled old man and says, "Oh my gosh! Is there anything I can do for you?" The old man whispers, "Unhook my suspenders from your side mirror."

One last one...

**What did the flashlight say to the darkness?.."Lighten up."**

"I am beset by a thousand questions, bedeviled by a hundred fears, blinded by untruths and unsure that I can find my way. Where should I look? How shall I find my way in the dark?"

First, here's a very old (and very unexpected) answer to these most difficult of questions:

***Tao Te Ching – Verse 52***

In the beginning was the Tao.  
All things issue from it;  
all things return to it.

To find the origin,  
trace back the manifestations.  
When you recognize the children  
and find the mother,  
you will be free of sorrow.  
If you close your mind in judgements  
and traffic with desires,  
your heart will be troubled.  
If you keep your mind from judging  
and aren't led by the senses,  
your heart will find peace.  
Seeing into darkness is clarity.  
Knowing how to yield is strength.  
Use your own light  
and return to the source of light.  
This is called practicing eternity.

(Translation: Stephen Mitchell)

And now, 5000 years later, a Welshman's tortured intuition tries the same answer:

***Light Breaks Where No Sun Shines***

Dylan Thomas (1914-1953)

Light breaks where no sun shines;  
Where no sea runs, the waters of the heart  
Push in their tides;  
And, broken ghosts with glow-worms in their heads,  
The things of light  
File through the flesh where no flesh decks the bones.  
A candle in the thighs  
Warms youth and seed and burns the seeds of age;  
Where no seed stirs,  
The fruit of man unwrinkles in the stars,  
Bright as a fig;  
Where no wax is, the candle shows its hairs.  
Dawn breaks behind the eyes;  
From poles of skull and toe the windy blood  
Slides like a sea;  
Nor fenced, nor staked, the gushers of the sky  
Spout to the rod  
Divining in a smile the oil of tears.  
Night in the sockets rounds,  
Like some pitch moon, the limit of the globes;  
Day lights the bone;  
Where no cold is, the skinning gales unpin  
The winter's robes;  
The film of spring is hanging from the lids.

Light breaks on secret lots,  
On tips of thought where thoughts smell in the rain;  
When logics dies,  
The secret of the soil grows through the eye,  
And blood jumps in the sun;  
Above the waste allotments the dawn halts.

The wisdom of these two works of poetry answers that awful question: Why does the progress of humankind always seem thwarted, bumping up against itself over and over? Why did what seemed like the bright promise of the “End of History” in the 1990’s, change so quickly into the darkness of the first two decades of the third millennium? Are we and the generations that follow destined to lose what has been gained at such high cost?

Red Pine, student and translator of the *Tao*, observes in the *Tao* the following irony about the relationship between light and darkness:

“Lao-tzu teaches us that the dark can always become light and contains within itself the potential for growth and long life, while the light can only become dark and brings with it decay and early death. Lao-tzu chose long life. Thus, he chose the dark.”

In more modern language, poet Dylan Thomas finds the sources of light in the hidden places of human nature. In the dark places of your own life, in the Dark Ages rhyming up through human history, in the darkest days of December, look to the tiny infant in the manger, look to the glimpse of hope in the eye of one who is homeless—hope not just for herself but for you as well, --and accept that for there to be beginnings, there must be endings.

Let’s end these readings with the voice of Maya Angelou. Angelou was herself a microcosm of the America story and more poignantly of human history. Out of the darkest of childhoods, which included being made mute for five years out of a child’s mistaken guilt, she climbed up and out into the sunlight of an honesty that released her natural courage and beauty to become one her country’s most prolific and honored writers. She found the light.

***On the Pulse of Morning***

Maya Angelou (1928-2014)

A Rock, A River, A Tree  
Hosts to species long since departed,  
Marked the mastodon,  
The dinosaur, who left dried tokens  
Of their sojourn here  
On our planet floor,  
Any broad alarm of their hastening doom  
Is lost in the gloom of dust and ages.  
But today, the Rock cries out to us, clearly, forcefully,  
Come, you may stand upon my  
Back and face your distant destiny,

But seek no haven in my shadow.  
I will give you no hiding place down here.  
You, created only a little lower than  
The angels, have crouched too long in  
The bruising darkness  
Have lain too long  
Face down in ignorance.  
Your mouths spilling words  
Armed for slaughter.  
The Rock cries out to us today, you may stand upon me,  
But do not hide your face.  
Across the wall of the world,  
A River sings a beautiful song. It says,  
Come, rest here by my side.  
Each of you, a bordered country,  
Delicate and strangely made proud,  
Yet thrusting perpetually under siege.  
Your armed struggles for profit  
Have left collars of waste upon  
My shore, currents of debris upon my breast.  
Yet today I call you to my riverside,  
If you will study war no more. Come,  
Clad in peace, and I will sing the songs  
The Creator gave to me when I and the  
Tree and the rock were one.  
Before cynicism was a bloody sear across your  
Brow and when you yet knew you still  
Knew nothing.  
The River sang and sings on.  
There is a true yearning to respond to  
The singing River and the wise Rock.  
So say the Asian, the Hispanic, the Jew  
The African, the Native American, the Sioux,  
The Catholic, the Muslim, the French, the Greek  
The Irish, the Rabbi, the Priest, the Sheik,  
The Gay, the Straight, the Preacher,  
The privileged, the homeless, the Teacher.  
They hear. They all hear  
The speaking of the Tree.  
They hear the first and last of every Tree  
Speak to humankind today. Come to me, here beside the River.  
Plant yourself beside the River.  
Each of you, descendant of some passed  
On traveller, has been paid for.  
You, who gave me my first name, you,  
Pawnee, Apache, Seneca, you  
Cherokee Nation, who rested with me, then  
Forced on bloody feet,

Left me to the employment of  
Other seekers—desperate for gain,  
Starving for gold.  
You, the Turk, the Arab, the Swede, the German, the Eskimo, the Scot,  
You the Ashanti, the Yoruba, the Kru, bought,  
Sold, stolen, arriving on the nightmare  
Praying for a dream.  
Here, root yourselves beside me.  
I am that Tree planted by the River,  
Which will not be moved.  
I, the Rock, I the River, I the Tree  
I am yours—your passages have been paid.  
Lift up your faces, you have a piercing need  
For this bright morning dawning for you.  
History, despite its wrenching pain  
Cannot be unlived, but if faced  
With courage, need not be lived again.  
Lift up your eyes upon  
This day breaking for you.  
Give birth again  
To the dream.  
Women, children, men,  
Take it into the palms of your hands,  
Mold it into the shape of your most  
Private need. Sculpt it into  
The image of your most public self.  
Lift up your hearts  
Each new hour holds new chances  
For a new beginning.  
Do not be wedded forever  
To fear, yoked eternally  
To brutishness.  
The horizon leans forward,  
Offering you space to place new steps of change.  
Here, on the pulse of this fine day  
You may have the courage  
To look up and out and upon me, the  
Rock, the River, the Tree, your country.  
No less to Midas than the mendicant.  
No less to you now than the mastodon then.  
Here, on the pulse of this new day  
You may have the grace to look up and out  
And into your sister's eyes, and into  
Your brother's face, your country  
And say simply  
Very simply  
With hope—  
Good morning.”