

Turn On Your Inner Light

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*Jeremiah 31:31-34, Hebrews 8:8-11,
John 1:1-5*

The Scripture Lessons

The passage from the prophet Jeremiah that we are reading was of particular interest to early Christians. It is quoted in its entirety in the New Testament's Letter to the Hebrews. It is the longest Old Testament text quoted in the New Testament.

What it promises is that a day is coming when we will experience an inner transformation that will enable us to know God intimately, obey the law of God, and to realize God's will for our lives. In today's terms, it is saying that a new spiritual operating system will be downloaded within our hearts, a new GPS navigating system – maybe something like what the Quakers have always called the Inner Light. Better yet, it's going to happen to everyone, from the least to the greatest – not just to special saints. God's law will be written on our hearts, and we will all instinctively know and obey God's will for our lives.

I'm going to read Jeremiah's words as they are quoted in the Letter to the Hebrews, and I will read it from Eugene Peterson's lively paraphrase in *The Message*.

Let's also hear the opening verses of the Gospel of John in which we read of the coming of the Christ, God's special Word to us, who is called "the light of all people," and "the light that enlightens everyone," the light that all the world's darkness will never overcome.

"Heads up! The days are coming when I'll set up a new plan for dealing with Israel and Judah. I'll throw out the old plan I set up with their ancestors when I led them by the hand out of Egypt. They didn't keep their part of the bargain, so I looked away and let it go. This new plan I'm making with Israel isn't going to be written on paper, isn't going to be chiseled in stone; This time I'm writing out the plan in them, carving it on the lining of their hearts. I'll be their God, they'll be my people. They won't go to school to learn about me, or buy a book called *God in Five Easy Lessons*. They'll all get to know me firsthand, the little and the big, the small and the great. They'll get to know me by being kindly forgiven, with the slate of their sins forever wiped clean." (*Hebrews 8:8-12, The Message*)

"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without

him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it." (*John 1:1-5, New Revised Standard Version*)

Sermon

There is one big problem confronting us as we try to interpret this text; unless I'm missing something, this promise doesn't seem to have been fulfilled. This new spiritual operating system doesn't seem to have been successfully downloaded into the Church of Jesus Christ. If we Christians are the people of this New Covenant, one might expect that, with this new implant, the church would be a scene of harmony, peace, and friendship as we, individually and collectively, know and practice God's will and plan for our lives.

Across 50+ years of ministry, I've never experienced such a harmonious congregation. It has been my privilege to have served many healthy congregations in which many ordinary folks lived happy and holy lives. However, there were always a few members who, while they claimed to be followers of Jesus, seemed to be following a different Jesus. In their lives, the implanted Inner Light didn't seem to be working properly. And beyond the local congregation, viewing the division and diversity of the world-wide family of faith, the picture is more dismal. Many Christians either dislike or even hate one another. Some professed followers of Jesus are the kind of people with whom I simply don't want to be associated. With such crazy varieties of Christian faith in our day, some of which are hateful, bigoted, and openly racist, whenever I'm with strangers who discover that I'm an ordained minister, I almost feel that I need to clarify my particular Christian identity. I want to say, "I'm not one of them! I'm not a follower of their perverted version of Jesus!"

So, here's what I wonder about Jeremiah's promise of a new covenant. Could it be that this is not a promise of something yet to come, but instead a reminder of something which has been here from the beginning – something that needs to be remembered and recovered? What I'm saying is that the Inner Light has always been present in every human heart; what we need to do is realize it, rekindle it, "turn it on." Let's go back to the beginning and follow the Inner Light, this sense of an interior divine Presence, through the Bible.

Our journey begins in the Book of Genesis (1:26): "Then God said, 'Let us make humankind in our own image, according to our likeness.'" From the very beginning, we have been the children of God's family; just as we bear the image of our earthly parents, we also bear the image of our heavenly Parent. There is some tiny spark of the divine in every human life. And I can't find any word in the Bible that says we ever lost that divine image, that we ever ceased being God's children.

But some devout reader of the Bible is saying, "But,

Morgan, you seem to have forgotten the second creation story and what happened in the garden of Eden, the story of the Fall and of the Original Sin, and how we lost the divine image." Well, just look more closely, because that's where the story gets even more interesting. What it says is that the Lord God (Yahweh in Hebrew) got his hands dirty, formed a little human out of the dust of the ground, and then (with a 'wuf') breathed into him the breath of life. And ever since that moment, we have been breathing the very name of God, Yahweh. As some Jewish scholars have observed, our unconscious activity of breathing replicates the name of God; you can say Yahweh without closing your lips. It's a name that you can breathe. It was the first word you uttered when you came out of your mother's womb, and it will be the last word you speak when you breathe your last breath and return to the Father's House. Whether we know it or not, Yahweh, the very name of God is uttered in our unconscious act of breathing. You don't decide to breathe, you just do. You can no more stop saying the name of God than you can stop breathing.

But now the story gets complicated, both better and worse at the same time. What happens in the Garden of Eden does not result in our being fallen sinners, born with the inherited disease of Original Sin. That's what some theologians, ancient and modern, have read into the story. But in the story (I'm being literal) the words "fall" and "sin" do not appear! Instead of falling, what happens is that we are lifted up, raised above the level of the other animals that live by instinct, and treated, instead, like children who have grown up and are given choices, almost as though we've become teenagers. We are given freedom of choice. God shows these maturing children the garden, as though saying to them, "Here are the trees of the garden, and here are the choices and consequences, but the choice is yours." And, as is nearly always the case, the teenagers make a bad choice, a really bad one, so that, for the first time in the Bible, we hear a dark and sad word, "I heard your voice in the garden, and I was afraid," answers guilty Adam.

This is the first mention of fear in the Bible – and it may tell us why, as we move on into the rest of the Bible, the most frequent command is "Fear not!" That's what happened in Eden; we became creatures of fear, worst of all, children who fear the very voice of their best Friend and Father.

The story of the Garden of Eden does not say that we lost the divine image, or that we are fallen sinners, born with an inherited disease called Original Sin. What we learn is that we became infected with fear, "original fear" – that's our problem. We became people with a fear-based disposition who, whenever we mess up, tend to feel that God must somehow be angry with us. And the rest of the Bible is the story of how God, in all kinds of ways, continues seeking us, loving us, and assuring us with the words, "Fear not!"

We were not abandoned by God because of what happened

in Eden. Eden does not, as some preachers say, cast a long, dark shadow over the rest of the Bible. The story of our bad choice in Eden is never mentioned again in the Hebrew scriptures. Interestingly, even those church fathers who believed in Original Sin (Augustine, Aquinas, and Ambrose) called our bad choice, the Blessed Sin (Felix Culpa), because without it we would never have known something better than childhood innocence – we would never have known the state of grace. The only message that can heal our Original Fear is the message of amazing grace – and that's what the rest of the Bible's story is about.

God's long-term recovery program, Plan B, now begins. As any good parent knows, it was about time to move out of the garden. It is as though God is saying, "No more free room and board. Get a job, earn a living by the sweat of your brow, pay for your own car insurance and cell phone! Settle down, get married, and have children, because there's nothing like having children that will really help you to grow up."

(But all of this makes you wonder. When God took the risk of giving us freedom of choice, didn't God know ahead of time that we would make bad choices? And do we ever learn without making mistakes, bad choices? Even if this story happened zillions of years ago, it sounds like a story we could have written ourselves. This is our story, a story that tells us how things always have been and still are, and best of all, a story about God's unceasing love for all of us, imperfect teenagers.)

So, they move out to live where we all live, east of Eden. But God never loses touch with them. God keeps doing all kinds of good stuff for them and their descendants, giving them those laws and guidelines that make life workable, and sending them prophets when they go astray. And some of them seem to respond; they don't act like irretrievably lost sinners with minds darkened by Original Sin. Indeed, some of them seem to catch a glimpse of the truth about their original, heavenly identity, and to obey the Inner Light.

There was Enoch who walked so closely with God that God took him home ahead of time (Genesis 5:24). Then there's Noah. He wasn't perfect and had some problems with the bottle in his old age. But still, he was "a righteous man and blameless in his generations" and he also walked with God (Genesis 6:9) And then there's Abraham. He lied out of fear once to protect himself, endangering his wife, Sarah, but still ended up being called the "friend of God" (James 2:23) And, of course, there is Moses, who had a temper problem on several occasions. Nonetheless, he was one whom God knew "face to face" (Deuteronomy 34:10) Elijah was also imperfect and subject to depression on one occasion, but he was taken home in a special chariot of fire (2 Kings 2:11). None of them were perfect; however, they let the Inner Light shine, to some degree, in and through their lives. And there may have been many more whose stories were never recorded. It's exactly what we read in the Gospel of John,

“the darkness has never overcome the light.”

Finally, however, there was One who let the Light shine perfectly through a fully human life. He lived a life of perfect obedience to God’s will in a limited mind and body like ours, so much so that, finally, his friends came to believe that he was that True Light, that light that lightens everyone, the light that the darkness could not overcome. Let’s be sure, however, that we’re talking about the same person, because Jesus was not Superhuman.

That’s the role that he rejected when he was tempted by the devil. He refused to jump off the pinnacle of the Temple like Superman, who could jump off tall buildings. Too many Christians, instead of believing that the Word was made flesh like our flesh, believe in a Superhuman Jesus who, like Clark Kent, mild-mannered reporter for the Daily Planet, down under this street clothes, wore his Superman outfit. This man, Jesus, refused the superhuman role so that he could become fully one with us in all of the limitations of what it means to be human. Jesus lived a fully limited human life. Let’s get a true picture of this man.

Jesus was a plain and simple man. He was born into a poverty-stricken family, the son of Joseph, who was a tekton, not a high-end carpenter, but something more like a construction worker. That’s why a world-class scholar of the New Testament, Bishop N.T. Wright, has Jesus’ skeptics saying, “Is not this the handyman?” Jesus’ family had lost their property, and lived below the level of those who still owned a piece of land. They had to get work wherever they could find it. They didn’t make fancy furniture for their rich neighbors because the people of lower Galilee were leading a threadbare existence, taxed into poverty by the Roman Empire. That’s why, if Jesus, Mary, and Joseph showed up here on a Sunday morning, the greeters would probably think that they were lost and had found the wrong church. One of the greeters, seeing them approaching our front door, might have said, “O Lord, here come the deplorables!”

Let’s notice also that Jesus was not handsome. The early Jewish Christians connected him with the passage in Isaiah (53:2) that says, “There was nothing attractive about him, nothing to cause us to take a second look.” And his body was a limited body, just like yours. He became so tired one day that he fell asleep in the back of a small fishing boat in the midst of a storm. Then too, if he had lived longer before being executed, his body would have aged just as ours does.

But he seems to have been a happy man who enjoyed life; he was certainly not an ascetic, monastic type. In fact, he was accused of being a “wine-bibber and a glutton” by his enemies – and he never denied the charge! His friends were the wrong people; “this man eats with sinners,” they said. Prostitutes, tax collectors, and other poor undesirables felt comfortable around him. With them, he enjoyed the simple pleasures of bread, wine, and fish – and once a year, some

roast lamb.

Because Jesus and his family were dirt-poor, he could not have had a higher education. There would not have been time for that in his family. With the high rate of illiteracy in Galilee, some scholars say he couldn’t have read very well. However, even though there were no family Bibles in that time, he must have known some passages of scripture because he was able to debate with the official scribes. What seems clear is that, however little scripture he may have known, the deep truth of that scripture was “lived” through his life. Jesus’ life was a “living Bible.” He didn’t have a Ph.D., but you don’t need one to say “yes” to the will of God. And that is the one thing that this plain and simple man did from the beginning. He said “yes” to God’s will. He let the Inner Light shine clearly through his life.

And that is why he performed some healing miracles – not because he was Superhuman, but because he was fully human and let God’s love flow unobstructed through his authentically human life. God’s intense love poured through his life, burning the cancerous fear at the heart of human dis-ease, making people whole. And a few of his followers ever since have had that healing touch.

His really big miracle, however, was not the raising of Lazarus from the dead; the big one took place on the cross when he forgave the very enemies who were crucifying him. When he said, “Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing,” he was forgiving all of us, because we were all there. You and I were there because, to some degree, we have never gotten our allegiance to Caesar and our hopes for the success of an earthly empire out of our system. (We somehow can’t let go of the notion that, if we can just elect the right leaders, our empire will save the world.) Yes, we were all there, but he forgave us – indeed, he forgave the entire world. “God was in Christ, reconciling the world to himself” (2 Corinthians 5:19). The entire world was forgiven, all of us, forever. The matter was settled, once and for all!

With that settled, the promised transformation began. According to Paul, we died with him, rose again with him, and were carried upward with him in his ascension into his place at the right hand of God – carried with him back up into Plan A. Our true life is now in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus. Our true life is already there, hidden with Christ in God (Colossians 3:3). Our real life is in him and he is in us. Just as Paul reminded the Athenians, “In him we live and move and have our being” (Acts 17:28). Now we can set our feet in lofty places, armed with Christ-like graces. To really live is to live in the light of this new life we have in him, to say “yes” to all of the heavenly possibilities that are ours in Christ. We are now the people of the high country, so let’s live our lives in the keen and bracing air of those silent mountains where we have this new life with and in Christ.

And that’s where you come into the story, because the meaning of all of this is that the story of Jesus isn’t finished; it’s meant to be continued in your life.

Just think of all the things that Jesus never got to do, that still need to be done for God’s glory. He never had a chance to play a musical instrument. So now he wants to make music through your life. Jesus never had an opportunity to be married and be a parent (he certainly could have without diminishing his spiritual glory), so now you can display what it can be like if all the possibilities of Jesus’ lovely life are realized in your family life. He never had a chance to run a business – and heaven only know how much we need do business for Jesus, using our prosperity for the sake of the poor, instead of “business as usual” for our own lavish enjoyment.

And don’t say that it’s too late, that these exciting possibilities don’t apply to you at your advanced age, and that you wish you had heard this sermon 20 years ago. Just remember that Jesus never had a chance to grow old. So, let him adorn the sunset years of your life with a brilliance more glorious than any sunset you’ve ever seen. And even if you’re disabled, and can’t walk as well as you once did, then hobble along with that staff, push that walker, or let your wheelchair roll along for Jesus!

You don’t have to do any of this perfectly. God’s perfection is so gracious as to be delighted with our imperfect attempts to say “yes” to God’s will. So, you are a child of God’s new covenant. God’s DNA has always been part of your nature. God’s Inner Light has always been burning in some little corner of your heart. So, before you leave here today, you can do something which will change your life radically and beautifully for the rest of your years on earth. You can say what Jesus said at every moment of his life, and what he said at the very end. You can say, “Thy will be done.” And when people see your life they will see what God is really like, because God is like Jesus.

And in this day in which so many people, including many Christians, seem to believe in a cruel and angry God, and act fearfully in their daily life, we need so many more true followers of Jesus who live and believe in a Christ-like God. Let’s all go out of here this morning, with our Inner Light turned on and shining brightly in this dark world. Let’s let our lives tell the “old, old story of Jesus and his love.” Let’s leave here today singing like little children, “This little light of mine, I’m gonna’ let it shine.”



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