

LOWER LIGHTS

A Sermon given by
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Bar Harbor Congregational Church
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'You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hidden. No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven. (Matthew 5:14-16)

It's so good to be with you again. I am remembering my first visit to your pulpit, last Fall, and how warmly you welcomed me and how impressed I was with the vitality and the generosity of your congregation. As I said then, I've been a Rob Benson fan for many years, dating to his days as the pastor of the Maine Seacoast Mission's ship, the *Sunbeam*, and his early visits to Great Cranberry Island where I spend my summers. It makes me glad to know that you recognize what a fine leader and pastor you have in him. Since I saw you last, I've made it through my first year of retirement, living down in Cumberland, Maine. As good as retirement has been, it's always good, too, to have an invitation to preach again, so thank you for this opportunity. Will you pray with me:

Let the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts together be ever acceptable in your sight, O God, our Rock, our Redeemer, and Friend. Amen.

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I want to begin by saying a few words about the nature of hope. I don't know if you think of yourself as a hopeful person, but it seems to me that it's getting harder to be one these days. The persistent enormities of our time – terrorism, certainly, and violent unrest . . . the masses of homeless refugees, to be sure . . . but also the vulgarization of culture, the poisonous pseudo-certainty of various fundamentalisms, the degradation of the earth, the nightmarish corruption of public power, to say nothing of the yawning loneliness that haunts us even as we expose ourselves endlessly on Facebook and elsewhere, how can you be hopeful in the face of these. Together, they constitute a daunting front of dangerous, ill winds coming across the sea and threatening anyone who dares to live out on the naked promontory of hope. I mean, if you *hope* – if you hope *at all* for the future of humankind, if you hope *at all* for your own soul – then you are living out on that promontory - exposed against the worst the world can give. Hope is a piece of coastland that juts into the roiling sea of the world's trouble. Hope is the great head of land on which lighthouses are built. Hope is the peninsula into the dark that always takes the worst of the weather. To hope is to risk, to put yourself out there, to feel the power of the malevolent storm. For instance, to hold

out hope against terrorism is to stand out on that exposed peninsula where the storm of evidence rages against you: Nice, Paris, Brussels, Boston, Baghdad, San Bernardino – a great darkness, indeed. Vulnerable as you are to the eroding forces that batter – hurricane-like – your little spit of solid ground . . . whipped by dangerous tempests that mock any idea of a benevolent heaven . . . and weakened by the natural fears that seem coded into human DNA – you might reasonably decide to give up on hope and run for cover. Why stay out there, when you can remove yourself inland where everything seems safer. You know what I mean: inland, where there is a vast, protective forest of shallow entertainments to help you forget the storm. Inland, where there are caves of cynicism, so alluring because, as everyone knows, it's safer to be cynical because if you don't hope for anything, you can never be disappointed. Inland, where, just to dull the pain, you are tempted to surrender to the numbing narcotic of despair. With the storm raging, inland seems safer . . . far safer than the exposed promontory of hope.

But listen to Jesus:

You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hidden. No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.

“The light of the world.” Jesus says that if the dark storm rages around us, we are the light. If the deep night closes over us, we are the light. If the shade of doubt settles over the earth, we are the light. Even if the shadow of death descends, we are the light. No, make it more personal. You, *you* are the light. You aren't meant to be inland, hiding away from the storm. You are meant to be out there on the shore, out in the face of the storm. Because there are some people – many people, actually, who are still out at sea. Maybe they got caught in someone else's war – say, the wars in the Middle East or the civil wars of our own cities. Think of the Syrian refugees, trying to make it to land on one of the Greek islands. Or think of the victims and families – on both sides – of that war that in many cities is raging between police and people of color. None of them wants to be out there in that ocean of mistrust. But they can't find their way home. There are people – so many of them – who because of economic conditions beyond their control, have been left afloat with no provisions. Without question, you know people who have suffered a loss and are now lost themselves on the great sea of grief. Jesus is saying that for the people on earth who are caught in the storm, you are the light of the world!

Does that feel like more of a burden than you can bear? Feel like more responsibility than you are up to? It surely does to me on most days. But what if we heard Jesus' words not as an order, not as a demand, not as an expectation, but as an *affirmation* . . . not as another “ought” but as a statement of fact, an unexpected encouragement. You are – not “you *should* be,” not “I'm *commanding* you to be,” but you *are* the light of the world! You have what is needed. It's already burning inside you. You are the light of the world!

Most of us balk at such claims, probably more out of modesty than anything else. “No, not me. I'm not that important.” Or we might shy away from Jesus' words because we harbor some darkness – each of us – some flaw, some guilt, some secret – so we don't feel worthy, let alone

capable, of being “the light of the world.” We might be a dim light, perhaps. A small flame. A flicker, maybe. But not “the light of the world.” OK, let’s work with that.

The evangelist Dwight Moody told, once, of a ship caught in a huge storm on Lake Erie. The sky was darkened and the waves fierce. Those on the ship peered desperately into the dark for the beam from a lighthouse. Finally one was glimpsed off in the distance. “Pilot,” the Captain asked, “are you sure this is Cleveland? There is only one light.”

“Quite sure, Captain,” came the reply.

“Where are the lower lights?” by which the Captain meant the lights of houses and other buildings on the shore.

“Gone out, sir.”

“Can you run in?”

“We’ve got to, Cap’n. Or die.”

The ship missed the channel and the boat was wrecked, with the loss of many lives. Moody’s lesson was that lighthouses are helpful, but you also need the smaller, lower lights along the shore to guide you to safety, and so he concluded: “God will take care of the great Lighthouse. It’s our work to keep the lower lights burning.” You might miss it on first hearing, but there’s a radical implication from that, namely that God can’t really save anyone without the lower lights. God can’t save the world without us. There has to be a lighthouse. But there need to be the lower lights, as well. So it was that after hearing that sermon Philip Bliss wrote the words for what was my father’s favorite old hymn. I understand that you sang it just a couple of weeks ago, but, with your forbearance, here it is again:

Brightly beams our Father’s mercy from His lighthouse evermore
But to us He gives the keeping of the lights along the shore.
Let the lower lights be burning, send a gleam across the wave!
Some poor fainting, struggling seaman, you may rescue . . . you may save!

It is quite an arresting, progressive idea, actually: that God isn’t the interventionist being in the sky who reaches down and fixes people’s lives or gives them “salvation.” That God, alone, doesn’t save anyone. The world needs the great Lighthouse, to be sure – God’s truth, God’s way, God’s love – but it only works when it is seen along with the lower lights, the lights along the shore, *our* lights. And, by the way, it’s important to say in this election season that our political leaders, to whom we often ascribe God-like power, and on whom we pin our hopes, are similarly unable, alone, to save us. The truth and power of God – the ideas and power of our Presidents and other leaders – these, by themselves, are never enough. They can’t save us. They can’t save the world. The lower lights have to be lit. The lower lights have to be there. You. You are the light of the world.

So, I’ve been thinking about the lower lights this week. They are – as the name implies – usually quite unassuming. I’m thinking, for instance, about the aides in the nursing home where my father spent the last years of his life, people who quietly, lovingly tended to him every day. I’d go to visit him and watch, in awe, at their daily ministrations. Let the lower lights be burning. I’m thinking about the woman I met on a plane a few weeks ago. I was fuming because I had left my iPad in the terminal, and the airline wasn’t helping me recover it. She gently talked me down

from my little tempest and without any judgment whatsoever said, “If you want to get some perspective on your troubles, look at who is sitting in the seat in front of us.” It was congressman John Lewis, an icon of the Civil Rights movement. He reminded me of the great light of a life of integrity, well lived, and that was inspiring. But she reminded me of the little acts of kindness and care that are just as important in making life bearable. Let the lower lights be burning. I’m thinking about the folks in churches like this one who, without fanfare, without much attention, do the day to day work – serving in soup kitchens, teaching church school, visiting the sick – work without which the church would be a purposeless relic. Let the lower lights be burning. I am thinking of people with developmental disabilities who, by virtue of their guileless joy and affection, make the world a gentler place. Let the lower lights be burning. I’m thinking about the masses of people who, under the banner of Black Lives Matter, have non-violently given a face to the concept of God’s justice. Most are nameless, but they steadfastly show up to give witness. Let the lower lights be burning! And, as I stand before you today, I am thinking about you . . . imagining the myriad ways in which your lights make God’s light real in the world. Never doubt that you are part of what our Jewish neighbors call *Tikkun Olam*, the repair of the world. So, though you just sang it recently, I wonder if you’d sing it with me again today. I’ll do the verses and you join me in the refrain, which is printed in your bulletin.

Brightly beams our Father’s mercy from His lighthouse evermore,
But to us He gives the keeping of the lights along the shore.
*Let the lower lights be burning! Send a gleam across the wave!
Some poor fainting, struggling seaman, you may rescue, you may save!*

Dark the night of sin has settled, loud the angry billows roar;
Eager eyes are watching, longing, for the lights, along the shore.
*Let the lower lights be burning! Send a gleam across the wave!
Some poor fainting, struggling seaman, you may rescue, you may save!*

Trim your feeble lamp, my brother, some poor sailor tempest tossed,
Trying now to make the harbor, in the darkness may be lost.
*Let the lower lights be burning! Send a gleam across the wave!
Some poor fainting, struggling seaman, you may rescue, you may save!*

Remember: You are the light of the world! Thanks be to God! Amen.

