



United Theological College
Convocation Address
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When a People in Darkness See a Great Light

By James Loney

*The people walking in darkness
have seen a great light;
on those who live in a land of the shadow of death
a light has dawned.
You have enlarged the nation
and increased their joy;
they rejoice before you
as people rejoice at the harvest,
as men rejoice
when dividing the plunder.
For as in the day of Midian's defeat,
you have shattered
the yoke that burdens them,
the bar across their shoulders,
the rod of their oppressor.
Every warrior's boot used in battle
and every garment rolled in blood
will be destined for burning,
will be fuel for the fire.
For to us a child is born,
to us a son is given,
and the government will be on his shoulders.
And he will be called
Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.
Of the increase of his government and peace
there will be no end. **(Isaiah 9:2-7)***

Dear brothers and sisters in the amazing, healing, liberating good news of Jesus Christ, good afternoon.

It is an extraordinary honour to be the very first recipient of the Craig Chaplin Memorial Award, humbling indeed to be recognized in the spirit of Craig Chaplin's passionate commitment to justice for lesbian and gay people in the church and his challenge to the Christian community to recognize the ministry of gays and lesbians to the people of God.

As many of you know, I was part of a group of four men who were kidnapped at gunpoint on November 26, 2006 in Baghdad. Harmeet Singh Sooden, Norman Kember and I were members of a small peace delegation that had gone to Iraq for ten days as part of the Christian Peacemaker Team presence there. The fourth, Tom Fox, was a member of the team who had been working in Iraq for over a year. He was separated from us in February and his body was found a month later near a railroad track. The remaining three of us were released on March 23, 2006.

About two months along into our four months of captivity, our captors brought us each a notebook and a pen. Up until then, the only amusement available to us was what we could conjure up from our imaginations and memory and share with our voices. Suddenly having a whole notebook full of blank empty pages, a way to express myself, to step outside my rambling, airless, jumbled-up thought-prison, I can't describe how exciting this was, except to say it was like having somebody throw me a lifeline from the shore after falling into a swift-moving river.

I wanted right away to write something, anything, see if in fact I still could. I'll never forget the pleasure of it. Because of how we were handcuffed, I had to write those first words leaning forward, the notebook perched on my thigh, the unfamiliar sensation of holding a pen in my left hand, my wrist bent awkwardly and unsupported. Instruction went forth from mind into hand and I wrote the words, "I can sort of write with my left it's much easier, sort of fun in a flowing way ."

One of the things I did to pass the time was to make lists: things we have the use of; things kept in Norman's pockets; examples of hostage ingenuity; things you can, and can't do, without disturbing the person you're handcuffed to.

Here are a few things I included in a list I called "things I took for granted about freedom":

- returning phone messages
- answering the door
- opening a window for fresh air
- going to the bathroom when I need to without having to ask
- reading the newspaper
- coffee with cream
- sun shining on my face
- being curled up with Dan
- looking out the window
- getting caught in the rain
- hanging clothes on the clothesline
- taking out the garbage
- having to pay attention to the weather
- clean socks and underwear

- making a grocery list
- being late for an appointment
- having keys in your pocket
- going home after being out somewhere

Joni Mitchell, in her song “Big Yellow Taxi,” perhaps says it best:

*“Don’t it always seem to go
That you don’t know what you’ve got
Till it’s gone.”*

I didn’t know what freedom was until it was taken away from me. Always it was something I just took for granted, just as I’ve taken health, mobility, seeing, tasting, smelling, hearing, feeling, a roof over my head, food to eat everyday—all the things I have the good fortune and privilege of being able to enjoy. Because I have them, I do not have to think about what it’s like *not* to have them.

Thus it seems, tragically, or perhaps beautifully, to be a law of human nature, or at least a standard operating practice, that if we have it, we take it for granted. The tragedy is that we squander and waste our most precious gifts by taking them for granted. The beauty is in the effortless enjoyment of them.

But we cannot escape absence and deprivation. They are part of our human condition, realities anchored in the inevitable and inescapable fact of our mortality. Every one of us in this room right now, and every human being on this planet, is a sister or brother in this truth. And because this is so, absence and deprivation are powerful, indispensable teachers. We come to know what we have and who we are through our poverty, our lacking, our need. We learn what freedom is through captivity; health through sickness; youth through old age; food through poverty; drink through thirst; life through death; light through darkness.

The people in darkness have seen a great light.

As a gay man, I belong to a people walking in darkness. I belong to a people who have long been forced to live in a shadow land of shame, self-loathing, existential degradation, moral opprobrium. A people who have been silenced, scorned, mocked, taunted, invisibilized, psychoanalyzed, incarcerated, lashed, bashed, beaten, burned, hanged. A people who sometimes have no other option but to believe what is said of us, that we are “intrinsically disordered,” a “serious depravity,” a “threat to the foundation of the family and the stability of society,” and therefore pretend to be what we are not and languish in suffocating closets, or destroy ourselves with parties, drugs and razor blades.

We know the darkness. We know what it is like to live in fear and trembling of what we might be. We know what it is like to be excluded, marginalized, despised, cast out. We know the body and soul terror of staking our lives on our desires, proclaiming this is who I am and this is who I love. Perhaps worst of all, we know what it is like to hate who we are.

But this darkness, terrible as it is, gives us a privileged way of seeing. We can see, from the place of exclusion what real inclusion is; from the place of shame what dignity is; from the place of oppression what liberation is. It is the people in darkness who are able to see light.

It is as simple as this. When I was a boy, the one scapegoated at recess, the last one picked for the team, the one no one wanted to be stuck with for a partner and everybody would pile on at recess, I knew in my bones that things would not be right with the world until this situation changed, until I, and all those who were different, were respected and accepted too. I could see what the so-called popular kids could not, that their popularity was constructed around a false and narrow sense of belonging—having the right looks, hairstyle, jeans, athletic prowess, insult—which they in turn were enslaved and disfigured by.

Because we have walked in this darkness, we have seen an amazing great light. And this light that we see, it is not outside and far away, but nearer in fact than breath or heartbeat. It is the light of God living and shining right within us, irrevocably within; the image and likeness of God body-breathing and heart-beating in our sacred desire to love and be loved, woman and woman, man and man, together giving birth to yet more love.

And seeing this light gives us an extraordinary power. It gives us power to say to the darkness, we beg to differ; power to say to the darkness, let there be light. Light that is not just for ourselves, but light that is for everybody. For it is the outsider who brings the gift of belonging, the wounded who brings the gift of healing, the condemned who brings the gift of emancipation.

This, Isaiah says, is what happens when the people walking in darkness see a great light: “You have enlarged the nation.” The tent is expanded. There’s more room for more people, a new kind of rainbow belonging. Whatever your shape, size, colour, hairstyle, physical ability or fashion sense, you are welcome. In fact, the only thing that matters is that you come as are, and *you* are nothing more, and nothing less, than a child of the living God.

And what happens when people really begin to see and live out of their child-of-the-living-God-ness? There’s only one thing really that can happen: the joy increases. It gets really really big. “You have enlarged the nation and increased their joy,” Isaiah says. “They rejoice before you as people rejoice at the harvest.” You end up with a giant party.

But wait, that's not all. When the people in darkness see a great light, they shatter the yoke that burdens them, the bar across their shoulders, the rod of their oppressor. Every warrior's boot used in battle and every garment rolled in blood will be destined for burning and fuel for the fire. That's because the people in darkness, when they see a great light, are not interested in turning the tables or getting what's theirs. They've been there and done that. They want something genuinely new and different. No more business as usual. No more victims. No more yokes and rods and warrior boots, no more garments soaked in blood. No, enough with all that.

When the people in darkness see a great light, they want something new. "For to us a child is born," Isaiah says. Through their suffering, something miraculous is born into the world. They groan and heave to give birth to a child, a new way of being and doing called "Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Mother and Father, Prince of Peace. Of the increase of his government and peace there will be no end."

This child will bring home a splendid plunder. But it's not the kind that's taken with weeping and gnashing of teeth when one people vanquishes another with chariot and sword, tank and gun. No, nothing like that at all! Something different. Not the spoils of victory, but the spoils of justice. The overflowing abundance of a new economy of sharing—love and acceptance, bread and roses for everyone—the fruit, if you'll pardon the pun, of a new dispensation of belonging, a banquet table where every human being has a place.

From a flaming, flamboyant queer fruity tribe of sexual outsiders—lesbians, gays, bisexuals, transgendered and two-spirited men and women—a new kind of power is being born. It is the power of transformation; the power of justice and right relationship, truth and listening, humble service of the common good; power that breaks from the darkness and renounces every kind of domination and every kind of violence; power that seeks to empower; power that accepts, restores and gives life. And this power, if we allow it, if we do not stand in the way of its silent, invisible, loving work, this power will give birth to a new paradigm of human belonging. And walls everywhere will come tumbling down, windows and doors will open wide, and fear will be banished from the face of the earth. We will begin to discover what it means to live in the glorious freedom of the children of God.

And that, my dear brothers and sisters in the amazing, healing, liberating good news of Jesus Christ, is what happens when a people walking in darkness see a great light.