

## Dawning of Light

Sermon 47 | Greystone Baptist Church | January 19, 2020  
Isaiah 9: 2-4 & Matthew 4: 12-22

*This little light of mine,  
I'm gonna let it shine.  
This little light of mine,  
I'm gonna let it shine.  
This little light of mine,  
I'm gonna let it shine.  
Let it shine, let it shine, let it shine.*

*This Little Light of Mine* is one of those songs that many of us just *know*. It's been a part of my life so long, I don't even know where I first heard it, or who first taught me the words. The daughter of a church musician, I probably heard it first as an infant. So, when I learned it again in children's choirs, this time with the motions to be performed on the steps of a sanctuary platform, my lips were already familiar with the words, my soul already knew the tune. As a child, I was unaware of the song's rich history, and I assumed that it was just another simple song that all church kids learned somewhere along the way.

There are contradictory stories about how the song first came to be. Some sources claim the song was written in the 1920s by Harry Dixon Loes who studied at the Moody Bible Institute and the American Conservatory of Music. He is believed to have penned this tune, along with several others, for children's choirs. Then in 1939, the song was collected by American musicologist, John Lomax, who considered it part of the folk tradition (which was the subject of his work). There are others who believe the song has its origins on southern plantations, where slaves sang out as a form of righteous protest against plantation owners.

It is now most-widely recognized as an African-American Spiritual, and is published as such in a number of church hymnals. It continues to be taught to children in churches that span the spectrums of race, economics, and denominational identity.

Regardless of its origins, the song really began to gain popularity in the 1950s and 60s when it became a signature refrain of the civil rights movement. From Atlanta to Birmingham, Montgomery to Memphis, civil rights advocates raised their voices to this tune as a means of curbing their fears and pressing on in the struggle for equal rights.

In 2018 Ari Shapiro did a piece on NPR, covering this song. In it he interviews a woman named, Rutha Mae Harris. Harris was a founding member of a group called the "Freedom Singers." It was a student quartet, formed in 1962, at Albany State College in Albany, Georgia. The group specialized in the fusion of black church music with the songs of the civil rights movement. Rutha Mae Harris and her college quartet weren't together long before people began to recognize the power of their music. Soon, the group was traveling

around the deep south, teaching their songs as a means of confronting the fears that advocates faced as they prepared to engage in peaceful, nonviolent resistance.

The clip (which you can listen to online) opens with Harris' deep voice belting the opening line. "You can't just sing, *This Little Light of Mine*, you've got to shout it," she says. Because this song, in the 50s and 60s wasn't just sung, it was really belted out, to push back the fear that protesters felt as they stood up against segregation and discrimination in the deep south.

Harris continued: "It kept us from being afraid. We'd start singing a song, and somehow those billy clubs would not hit you. [This song] played a very important role during the movement."<sup>iii</sup>

The song's themes as well as the Civil Rights Movement itself grew out of the Bible and Christian tradition. Whether the words were first penned by a white academic in the 1920s or raised on the lips of black slaves in the antebellum south, their meaning and the image of the light of Christ come straight from the Bible.

"The people who sat in darkness  
have seen a great light,  
and for those who sat in the region and shadow of death  
light has dawned."

These are the words read in today's Gospel reading from Matthew, chapter 4. And they sound a lot like those from Isaiah 9 printed as a reflection on the inside cover of our bulletins today. They're almost exactly the same. In Isaiah, the words describe the darkness of the Assyrian occupation. Matthew reaches back into the tradition of the Hebrew prophets, and quotes Isaiah in order to place Jesus squarely within the prophetic tradition. When the prophets fell silent, God's voice had diminished, the light was gone and darkness had come over the people. But now, says Matthew, light has dawned as Jesus begins his ministry in Galilee.

As we continue reading we see the light dawning through the life and ministry of Jesus as he travels along the shore. Simon Peter and Andrew are the first to see it and immediately respond, leaving their fishing careers behind them. They become two more lights shining, moving along the shore. Not long after, two more brothers, James and John, see the light dawning and they respond so quickly that they leave their father in the boat. Now there were five lights shining in Galilee as Jesus and the four disciples travel throughout the region teaching, healing, and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom.

I know it isn't historically possible, but as I imagine the courage of Jesus and the bravery of these first disciples to leave everything behind and follow Jesus... I can't help but wonder if they sang, "This little light of mine, I'm gonna let it shine," as they travelled throughout Galilee casting a vision for a new kind of world.

Perhaps if they'd known the tune, maybe if they'd been taught the words as children they might have felt the same kind of comfort in the song that Rutha Mae Harris described in her interview on NPR. I suppose it doesn't matter what century or continent you live on... shining a light in the darkness is always risky business.

Darkness can take all kinds of forms. There is a physical darkness that obscures our vision and ignites fears of the unknown. There is a psychological darkness that sometimes shows up as depression or anxiety. There is relational darkness when we are not at peace with those we love the most. There is also a spiritual darkness that emerges when sin consumes us or when we feel forgotten or abandoned by God. As we follow Jesus throughout Matthew's Gospel we find him illuminating these areas of darkness with compassion and solidarity.

As Jesus grows in relationship with all kinds of unsavory people - lepers, women, sinners, and foreigners - he begins to illuminate another kind of darkness. This is darkness of communal sin and injustice. The people that Jesus was drawn to were those who were dismissed, ignored, and oppressed by the religious and political powers of the day and Jesus' mission was about shining a light in their direction so that their darkness could no longer be ignored.

Even though it was frowned upon by the powers of Rome, Jesus' light shone brightly into the darkest corners of the empire, illuminating the faces of people who had been trampled on by systems of injustice.

Shining a light like that would get you killed in ancient Galilee.

History doesn't tend to be so kind to the light-bearers. We can think of so many who have bravely and boldly said "yes", like the first disciples. Faithful followers who have left behind lucrative careers and stable living situations to follow the call to be a light that shines into the darkness.

We remember Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the German pastor and theologian who courageously spoke out against the Nazis in the 1930s and 40s. Bonhoeffer was invited to teach at Union Theological Seminary in New York City in 1938 to escape the consequences of his refusal to join the German army and swear an oath to Adolph Hitler. He accepted the invitation to come to the United States, but it wasn't long before he realized he had made a mistake. Bonhoeffer knew that God had called him to return to Germany and be a light shining in the darkness.

*I must live through this difficult period in our national history with the people of Germany. I will have no right to participate in the reconstruction of Christian life in Germany after the war if I do not share the trials of this time with my people.  
...Christians in Germany will have to face the terrible alternative of either willing*

*the defeat of their nation in order that Christian civilization may survive or willing the victory of their nation and thereby destroying civilization. I know which of these alternatives I must choose but I cannot make that choice from security.*<sup>iii</sup>

After his return to Germany, Bonhoeffer was harassed, silenced, arrested, and eventually killed by his own government for his refusal to surrender his faith for his country. His light reflected the light of Christ, and it shone brightly into the darkness of anti-Semitism and xenophobia.

In American history, we have our own light-bearers. We celebrate one tomorrow as we remember the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. A Baptist preacher and civil rights leader known for his inspired sermons and his dreams for a desegregated country, King's light reflected the light of Christ and it shone bravely, illuminating the darkness of racism and segregation. King's light, joined the lights of Rosa Parks and Fred Shuttlesworth and Ruby Bridges and countless others who accepted great risk in order to shine in the darkness.

Much has changed since Jesus walked the shores of Galilee and Bonhoeffer returned to Germany. There has been tremendous progress in the work of racial reconciliation in this country. But we have not arrived yet at a perfect world. There is still so much darkness - individual and collective. There are so many dark corners of our lives and of our world that desperately need the light of Christ to burst in illuminating a way forward. In fact, the need is so great that it can be paralyzing as we sit back and think, "well, I'm no King ... I'm no Bonhoeffer... my light is so small; how could it ever make a difference?"

But then we remember the ordinary folks like James and John, Simon Peter and Andrew, who were just average fishermen doing their work, until Jesus came along and said, "follow me."

The call to follow Jesus is a call to be a light-bearer.

It is a call to follow Jesus into the dark corners of our lives and this world and to bravely shine a light that brings healing to all that is broken within us.

It is a call to shine a light that offers compassion and solidarity to those who are suffering around us.

It is a call to shine our light no matter how small or insignificant we fear it may be, because our lights, joined together, and emboldened by the spirit of God can stamp out all the darkness this world tries to hold.

The call to follow Jesus is a call to bear Christ's light, no matter the cost. And anytime we feel afraid, perhaps we might remember the witness of Rutha Mae Harris and let our small voices join with hers as we sing:

*This little light of mine, I'm gonna let it shine,  
This little light of mine, I'm gonna let it shine,  
This little light of mine, I'm gonna let it shine,*

*Let it shine, let it shine, let it shine.*

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<sup>i</sup> <https://www.npr.org/2018/12/24/679895682/how-the-civil-rights-movement-transformed-this-little-light-of-mine> retrieved, January 16, 2020.

<sup>ii</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>iii</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dietrich\\_Bonhoeffer#Return\\_to\\_the\\_United\\_States](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dietrich_Bonhoeffer#Return_to_the_United_States) , retrieved, January 16, 2020.