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## *Stand Out of Our Light*

**A sermon by the Very Rev. Sam Candler  
The First Sunday after Epiphany – Year B**

Before I begin the sermon proper today, please allow me to set these words in context. I am recording these remarks on Thursday, January 7, in the year 2021. It is the day after The Feast of Epiphany, January 6. But I did not celebrate yesterday; and I got no sleep last night. Yesterday, incited thugs terrorized the Capitol of the United States, defaced and damaged the Capitol building, terrorized our elected officials, and did all this with apparent impunity. The evidence is clear that they acted with the brazen encouragement and instigation of the outgoing president of the United States. And the evidence is clear – not the claim, but the evidence—the evidence is clear that the outgoing president has been accepting, inciting, and amplifying such disgraceful and dishonorable behavior for years.

Yesterday's terrorist insurrection was initially met with bewildered and unprepared police response – a completely opposite response to the hundreds, and then thousands, of armed forces who met marchers of color this past summer. The racism in these two different responses is unmistakable to me. My spirit, my soul, is crushed and flat today. I am sickened and disheartened.

You will hear this sermon on Sunday, three days after I have recorded it. I pray that our country, and all our souls, will have some peace, and far more hope, on this coming Sunday. Already, I have been heartened by some brave and gallant actions, many of them coming from our home state, Georgia, upon which the attention of our entire country has been focused for two months. Thank you, thank you, to many of our elected leaders, certainly people like Georgia's Secretary of State and Georgia's voting officials, and thank you to all of you who have voted faithfully in the past year. What a year. I pray that the year 2020, is on its last gasps.

I am charged with preaching the gospel of Jesus Christ for Sunday, January 10, 2021. My text is from our first lesson:

*In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters. Then God said, "Let there be light"; and there was light. And God saw that the light was good; and God separated the light from the darkness. God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And there was evening and there was morning, the first day. (Genesis 1:1-5)*

We read the first verses of the first chapter of the first book of the bible today. The story of the first day of creation in the book of Genesis. Indeed, there is something about this Sunday that is a new beginning. In the Church, it's a new beginning. We are beginning the season of Epiphany, the season of light and growth. We hear about the baptism of Jesus himself, and his new beginning. We are in the early days of a new year ourselves.

When the powerful leader, Alexander the Great, began his reign, he travelled about his kingdom, receiving congratulations from the people. People were eager to salute and to admire him; and, doubtless, he enjoyed soaking in the adulation. The story goes that he was in Corinth, receiving such accolades, when he realized that one of the local, eccentric philosophers, had not come to pay his respects.

So, Alexander the Great decided to go visit this strange philosopher, Diogenes, himself. As Alexander the Great approached Diogenes, Diogenes did not even get up; he lay there soaking in the sun. But Alexander was determined to connect with Diogenes, and so Alexander asked Diogenes if there was anything he wanted or

needed. Alexander said that he would do it for him.

"Yes," said Diogenes, "Stand out of the sun." Stand out of my light. Ha! It is said that Alexander was so surprised by this independence that he was not offended, but, instead, admired Diogenes. His followers were laughing at the incident, but Alexander apparently said, "Truly, if I were not Alexander, I wish I were Diogenes."

Stand out of our light.

Those are good words for all of us to hear today, whoever we are, whether we are newly elected somewhere, or whether we are newly out of a job somewhere, or whether we are simply the grand assembly of the people of God. Don't get in the way of the light.

Today, we are celebrating Epiphany, the Light of the world. Stand out of our light. When Jesus came into the world, the gospel writer John said that "grace and truth came through Jesus Christ" (John 1:17). Grace and truth. Stand out of our light. Stop standing in the way of grace and truth.

A present day philosopher, James Williams, wrote a handy little book several years ago, with that very title, "Stand Out Of Our Light." He starts the book with that familiar story of Alexander the Great and Diogenes. But his point is quite contemporary.

He believes, with others, that our present age of astounding access to information has not saved us so much as it has debilitated us. We have so much information, and also so much disinformation, available to us, all the time, that we have lost the ability to truly pay attention to what is important and true. We have lost the ability to see what is truly light.

Instead, we are distracted. Distracted, over and over again, by so many things, things that can be unimportant, and things that can be simply wrong.

Some of it may be inconsequential enough. We can't watch television without also surfing from channel to channel, distracted at a moment's notice. We can't use our computers and tablets and smart phones, without also jumping from web site to web site, distracted over and over again by the latest clickbait.

But what is worse, says Williams, is that we risk being manipulated. We are being manipulated by boundless information! Information once promised us salvation! But now, it overwhelms us. We have forgotten, some of us, how to tell. We have forgotten how to discern accurate information from inaccurate information! We have forgotten how to tell the truth!

And then, even worse, we repeat and re-tweet, such disinformation. We spread bad gossip, saying such things as "Oh, I'm just passing this on, without comment. I'm just the messenger, not the message." Wrong. Once we have repeated disinformation, we are responsible for it; it is now our message. We have subtly agreed to it and amplified it. We become enablers.

Williams quotes Goethe in the superscript of one of his chapters, saying this: *Who will be great, must be able to limit himself.* (Williams, James. *Stand out of our Light: Freedom and Resistance in the Attention Economy* (p. 17). Cambridge University Press. Kindle Edition.)

Whoever would be great must limit themselves.

As we remember the baptism of Jesus today, it is worth remembering that, according to Matthew, John the Baptist questioned why Jesus needed to be baptized by John at all. Matthew 3 says that "John would have prevented him, saying, "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?" But Jesus answered him, "Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness." (Matthew 3:14-15).

Even Jesus, the Light of the World, submitted to order and righteousness. Even Jesus submitted to baptism, from another person. "And just as he was coming up out of the water, Jesus saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. And a voice came from heaven, saying, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased" (Mark 1:10-11).

"Whoever would be great must limit themselves," said Goethe, to any world leader. "Whoever would be great among you must be servant of all," said Jesus.

We worship Jesus, not the Jesus whose name gets posted up on a banner carried by thugs. No, we worship the Jesus who was not distracted by adulation or self-importance or narcissism as he began his ministry. He was not distracted by whatever was simply available before him. Today, Jesus shows us the art of paying

attention to what needs attention: order and righteousness, grace and truth, self-giving love.

On this feast day, the Feast Day of the Baptism of Christ, we remember how Jesus began his ministry. And in our remembrance, we commit to beginning anew as well

No matter who we are, no matter how many times we have re-begun before, no matter how many times we have re-set, no matter how many times we have been born again, the vows of baptism offer us a chance to begin anew, to begin again, again.

To re-connect to those things in life that are truly important, and graceful and true – not to the distractions and misinformations of life.

On the first day of creation, the very first day of creation, God said, “Let there be light!” and God has been proclaiming that light on every day since. It is every day of every year that God says, “Let there be light.”

When Jesus, the Light of the world, began his ministry, submitting to baptism, a voice from heaven said, “You are my son, the beloved.” When we follow Jesus, that same voice speaks the same words to each of us: “you are my child, the beloved.”

Yes, you. And you, and you, and you. You are loved, no matter who you are. No matter how many times you have won, and no matter how many times you have lost. No matter who you voted for and no matter who you did not vote for. You are loved. That means you can transmit love, too.

It was in the year 1957, Christmas Day, December 25, that Martin Luther King, Jr, preached a sermon titled, “Loving Your Enemies,” at Dexter Avenue Baptist Church, in Montgomery, Alabama. It included a passage whose first lines we remember often, but whose last lines we don’t remember so much. It goes like this:

*Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that. Hate multiplies hate, violence multiplies violence, and toughness multiplies toughness in a descending spiral of destruction.*

Light drives out darkness. Love drives out hate. Otherwise, we descend in a spiral of destruction.

This season of Epiphany, in the year 2021, is the season to amplify light in the darkness. To spread good news. To spread love. You. You and you. Like Jesus at his baptism, “You are a child of God, the beloved.”

You are loved. And with that love, comes light, inevitable light. People who are loved, shine out light! And people who love, give forth light! People who love are repeating the same creative act of God. Let there be light. Let there be love.

AMEN.