

LIGHTS OUT

Genesis 1:1-5 / Revelation 22:1-5

The late Bob Shelton, former president of Austin Seminary, was one of the foremost influences on my preaching ... so, naturally, I blame him for all my shortcomings. He was a committed, faithful Cumberland Presbyterian who began to preach in Dickson County, TN, at the tender age of sixteen. "In my first sermons," Bob used to tell us students, I began with Genesis and worked my way through the bible all the way to Revelation. Don't do that! Just pick one thing and stick to it!" His advice has served me well thus far, but *today* I am going to blatantly ignore what Bob has taught me. I will begin with Genesis and I will end with Revelation.

"When God began to create heaven and earth—the earth being unformed and void, with darkness over the surface of the deep and a wind from God sweeping over the water—God said: "Let there be light!" And there was light. God saw that the light was good, and God separated the light from the darkness. God called the light Day, and

the darkness God called Night. And there was evening and there was morning. A first day.”

Compared with other creation stories of the *Ancient Near East*, the Genesis creation account is extraordinary in its austerity. Rather than providing us with high drama and graphic descriptions, the first five verses of scripture give us hardly any sensory details at all. I think the writer of this text did not want us to be sidetracked, but rather wanted to focus our attention where it belongs: on God, the creator of all there is.

What is remarkable here is that God, who is completely self-sufficient, decides to take a step back, if you will, and give God’s creation space to be. The Swiss theologian Karl Barth used to say, “God really did not need any of us. Nevertheless ... God chose not to be God without us.”

Our Jewish ancestors call this *ZimZum*, God’s curtailing of God’s power because of God’s desire to be in relationship with us. It is the ultimate act of love. As God establishes the rhythm of life—Day /

Night, morning / evening—God turns on the lights for us and infuses everything with divine energy.

One thing that troubles me these days—one thing among many other things—is that we have apparently confused our creative abilities with God's ability, and our power with God's power. And while God is willing to give us space to be, we have a hard time imitating God in whose image we were made. Rather than making room for others to flourish, we insist on having everything our own way. Rather than loving others as God loved us in the first place, we are stingy with that love.

A classic example for me these days is the discussion about global warming and our energy crisis. As world leaders are meeting in Glasgow to address this existential issue, they continue to talk about technological solutions to this crisis. Among these are: Phasing out fossil fuels and investing more in green energies like solar, wind, or water. Replacing gasoline powered cars and engines with electric ones. Building smart, energy efficient homes. Curbing methane

production. Eating more vegetables and less meat. Geoengineering the atmosphere to block sunlight or turning CO₂ emissions into rock by capturing the gas and channeling it underground. No one, however, at least not to my knowledge, is engaged in serious talks about *ZimZum* ... in talks about how we can restrict our own footprint, how we can consume less all around in order to give others, to give *all* creation, room and space to breathe and to be.

It would be much more helpful, in my opinion, to frame conversations such as these in biblical and theological terms rather than political or economic ones. While all of the tech solutions I mentioned are certainly critically important right now, they will not be sufficient to stave off dire consequences. Perhaps it is time to talk about theological things again—like “sacrifice,” or “renunciation,” or “repentance.” Perhaps it is time to remind ourselves of Jesus’s commandment that we ought to love one another—not just the lovable, but *all* people—and love God’s good, indeed very good, creation in the way God loved us first from the moment God separated

light from darkness, gave us night and day, and established for us a rhythm of life and love.

Backing down to give one another room to breathe and to be has also fallen out of favor in our public discourse, in the way we speak to each other. It has crept into our families and our churches. And this is not only an American phenomenon. It is a global phenomenon. All in all, there does not seem to be much love—genuine, sacrificial love—to go around these days.

God invested God's divine energy with us and in us and called us not only to look after one another, but to look after the good earth God created as well. Which begs the question: Where, and how, do we invest our human, all too human, energies? This is always a good and timely question to ask ourselves, particularly during stewardship season. Are we willing to invest our energies—our relational energies, our financial energies, our cultural energies—to the point where it might hurt, meaning where we have to give of ourselves so that others have room and space to breathe and be? In doing this, by not insisting

on our own way, we participate in the ultimate gift of love as God has shown us.

The apostle Paul reminds us in 1 Corinthians that love is not a feeling but a choice, and that the choice is ours: “Love is patient. Love is kind. Love is not boastful or arrogant or envious or rude. It does not insist on its own way. It does not rejoice in wrongdoing but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends. ... And now faith hope and love abide—these three. And the greatest of these is love.”

In the end, however, all our choices and all our efforts will only have temporary consequences—sometimes for good, sometimes for ill. And this is where my teacher and mentor Bob Shelton comes in again. He would remind me that Genesis and Revelation have a trajectory, that there is a reason scripture is arranged the way it is.

The message is that God’s ultimate gift of love toward all people and all creation will not be thwarted—in spite of what we might choose to do or what we might leave undone. For “the river of the water of life”

flows through God's new creation. It is lined by the "tree of life [whose] leaves are for the healing of the nations. Nothing accursed will be found there anymore." We will see God's face as the apostle Paul promised. "And there will be no more night. [We] need no light of lamp or sun, for the Lord God will be our light, and we will reign with God forever and ever."

In spite all the energy we expend, all lights will go out at some point. The artificial ones we created as well as the natural ones God created. There will be no more day and no more night and the rhythm of the universe will come to a halt. Then, God will be our light once and for all.

And now, "the one who testifies to these things says, "Surely I am coming soon!"

So come, Lord Jesus!

And the grace of the Lord Jesus be with all the saints. May it be so, for you, for all people, for God's good creation, and for me.

Rev. Dieter U. Heinzl, PhD

Ladue Chapel Presbyterian Church (USA), St. Louis, MO

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