

Embracing the Light

REFLECTIONS ON GOD'S WORD

*There is yet more light and truth
to break forth from God's Holy Word.*

JOHN ROBINSON, IN HIS FAREWELL ADDRESS
TO THE PILGRIMS, 1620 (alt.)

BY MARY NELSON KEITHAHN

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CREATOR,
CHRIST, AND
HOLY SPIRIT



One God, Many Names

Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone.
(Deuteronomy 6:4)

A wandering Aramean was my ancestor; he went down into Egypt and lived there as an alien, few in number, and there he became a great nation, mighty and populous. When the Egyptians treated us harshly and afflicted us, by imposing hard labor on us, we cried to the Lord, the God of our ancestors; the Lord heard our voice and saw our affliction, our toil, and our oppression. The Lord brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, with a terrifying display of power, and with signs and wonders; and he brought us into this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey.
(Deuteronomy 26:5b-9)

Lord, you have been our dwelling place in all generations. Before the mountains were brought forth, or ever you had formed the earth and the world, from everlasting to everlasting you are God. (Psalm 90:1-2)

When our oldest child was learning to talk, he would often point to objects and ask, “What’s that?” It was no surprise to us then that he asked the same question the first time he saw his baby sister! She was another new part of his world. As he got to know her, she became a “who” instead of a “what,” and his names for her expanded: little sister, playmate, rival, friend.

We may learn the given names of people when we are introduced to them, but it is only as we come to know them through shared

experiences that we begin to identify them by other names: partner, mentor, colleague, friend. So it is with God. As we experience the divine presence in our lives, we choose names for God that are meaningful to us and add new names to the list. It was the Hebrew people's experiences with God in Egypt, in the wilderness, and in the Promised Land that led them to proclaim: "God is one, not many. God hears our cries and answers them. God is eternal, without beginning or end."

Many centuries later, in the Black Hills of South Dakota, a Lakota medicine man and mystic named Black Elk used words from his tribal language to affirm the same qualities in God. He called God "Tunkashila" and "Wakantanka." Tunkashila is the Lakota word for "Grandfather." Wakan means "mysterious and holy" and Tanka means "great." For Black Elk, God was the "Great Spirit" who was like a wise and compassionate grandfather to all creatures and creation. Thus he prayed:

Grandfather, Great Spirit, you have always been and before you no one has been. There is no other one to pray to but you. You yourself, everything that you see, has been made by you. The star nation all over the universe you have finished. The four quarters of the earth you have finished. Grandfather, Great Spirit, lean close to the earth that you may hear the voice I send.... Give me the strength to walk the soft earth, a relative to all that is! Give me the eyes to see and the strength to understand, that I may be like you. With your power only can I face the winds.¹

Prayer: *May the names we give you, God, help others find meaning in your presence in our lives. Amen.*

1. *Excerpt from Black Elk Speaks, by John G. Niehardt (State University of New York Press, annotated edition, 2008).*



What's on Your Christmas List?

*[Jesus] himself said, "It is more blessed to give than to receive."
(Acts 20:35, sel.)*

God loves a cheerful giver. (2 Corinthians 9:7b)

What do you want for Christmas this year? How often children are asked that question as the holidays approach! Rarely does anyone inquire about the gifts they plan to give others. Busy parents find it hard to schedule time to shop with their children or help them with homemade gifts. They put all their energy into satisfying their children's wish lists, rather than letting them experience the joy of giving, which is such an important part of celebrating the birth of Jesus.

Two of my grandchildren grew up in the community where I made my home. Each December, when they were younger, I took them out individually for lunch and shopping so they could choose small Christmas gifts for their parents and one another. Their parents sent money and some suggestions, but the children made their own choices after visiting their favorite stores and looking over all the merchandise. After they made their purchases, I helped them wrap and tag their gifts. I can still remember five-year-old Kenny beaming with pride every time his father wore the Bugs Bunny tie he picked out at the post office, and his mother wore her rainbow earrings. His sister Katie, then ten, was so caught up in the spirit of giving that year that she used tickets earned at a spring carnival at

church to buy gifts for her mother and grandmothers for Mother's Day. She was overjoyed at finding just the right thing for each of us. (My gift was a pen to hang around my neck!)

The joy of giving does not always come naturally to children, or adults, for that matter. On their first Christmas shopping excursions, my grandchildren were often distracted by things they saw and wanted for themselves. With practice, however, they gradually learned to focus on the needs of others instead of their own. They learned to be "cheerful givers," taking delight in surprising loved ones with gifts they had chosen with great thought and care.

The church depends on people who have discovered this spirit of joyful generosity, and embraced it as a way of life. When "cheerful giving" becomes a habit, there is no end to what we can accomplish as a community of faith.

Prayer: *Generous God, giver of all good things, help us find ways to practice "cheerful giving" so we too can learn that it is more blessed to give than receive. Amen.*



Comforters and Long Johns

Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted. And Jesus came and said to them, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age." (Matthew 28:16-20)

It was cold and snowy in Minnesota one February, when my father and I headed for his winter home in Arizona for a few weeks in the sunshine. Unfortunately, that year Arizona was cooler and wetter than usual, and sunshine was hard to find. Weather reports became an important part of our daily conversations. Wherever we went, my father, who was almost ninety-three, had a hard time keeping warm. No matter how much I pleaded with him, he simply would not put on his long underwear in Arizona! I had to keep him supplied with comforters and blankets on every excursion.

This started me thinking about the things we use to keep ourselves warm, not just physically but spiritually. Some people say they come to church to be "wrapped in the warmth of God's love." Love for them is like a great, fluffy comforter enfolding them as they sit before a fire, warm and protected against the cold outside world. I am more apt to think of God's love as a suit of long underwear

insulating us from the harsh cold of winter, yet enabling us to get out and set about doing God's business in the world.

I don't think God intends us to stay home in front of our fires, wrapped in our comforters and security blankets. Rather, God clothes us with love and sends us out into the world, to set it on fire with mercy, compassion, and justice. Jesus said, "Go. Make Disciples. Baptize. Teach." We can't do that wrapped in a blanket. Long underwear is definitely the order of the day!

Prayer: *God, whose love is both our comforter and our long underwear, fire us up to leave our hearths and get going on the mission you have given us. Amen.*