

## A Certain Slant of Light: the Physics of Incarnation

*Edna Froese*

I am grateful that my Bible School homiletics teacher of thirty years ago is not in the congregation this morning, for I am about to violate many of the principles he taught us. My sermon-writing this time began, not with a Scripture text as it should, but with the sermon title. And that comes from a poem by Emily Dickinson which begins:

There's a certain slant of light,  
On winter afternoons,  
That oppresses, like the heft  
Of cathedral tunes.

Heavenly hurt it gives us;  
We can find no scar,  
But internal difference  
Where the meanings are.

The first time I ever read that poem, I recognized that heavenly hurt: I used to call it the Sunday evening blues because that's when it often struck me. It's an irresistible mixture of *Sehnsucht* and *Angst*, longing and terror, an appropriate response to the glimpses of holy mystery we are sometimes granted.

My next homiletical sin is to come before you, not with an obvious outline that marches nicely toward direct answers and instructions, but with a kind of thinking aloud about difficulties I haven't worked through yet. It is my prayer that somehow, through my moth-like anxious circling around the light I'm afraid to get too close to, you may receive some heavenly hurt that will make an "internal difference where the meanings are," perhaps not today, but sometime when it's needed.

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Having opened the door to poetry as it were, poem after poem walked in, demanding attention, flaunting images of light, and claiming to shed light on those images of light. The more I tried to find some other topic, the stronger was the compulsion to face, after long evasion, that daunting statement Jesus makes in the Sermon on the Mount: "You are the light of the world. . . . Let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven."

That command (or is it an observation?) has always caused me trouble. It has usually been quoted as an imperative to witness, an activity strongly encouraged, even organized, by the churches I have been part of. Unfortunately, for me it has usually meant specific methods, such as door-to-door selling, or giving testimonies at "outreach events," or confronting people with tracts. Being neither outgoing nor a natural salesperson, I find such definitions of witnessing scary, even though I know that many people's lives have been changed by such methods. Even as a child I felt uneasy singing that little chorus, "This little light of mine, I'm going to let it shine." I was never sure I had a light worth shining or a salvation worth selling.

Quite probably I also cringed at "You are the light of the world," because of the equation between light and truth, and light and God. "God is light," we are told, "and in him is no darkness at all." That is not necessarily comforting. I personally prefer to hide in some shadows. Light is not an unambiguously good thing, not when you have a migraine headache or a hangover. Truth can be just as much of an assault on the vulnerable. What I was taught in the church and at home was truth. It divided the world into good and bad, into black and white. Everything I was told about God was truth, fact, and it was all unambiguous, unnegotiable. If I learned those facts correctly and if I believed those facts I would be saved. Those facts also included some very specific instructions about how to live, how to dress, what not to do. To fail to follow those instructions was to walk in darkness all the way to hell. To this truth – to this unbending, glaring light – I was to witness?

No doubt my understanding of truth and of witnessing to that truth was thoroughly skewed. All those preachers I remember could not possibly have meant what I often heard. Nevertheless, to find my way out of the difficulties with "you are the light of the world," I turned, not to the usual Christian authorities, but to poets and to the principles of physics. About poetry I

understand something, about physics I understand very little. And I understand even less about that scary story of Moses' personal meeting with Yahweh, the God of light. Yet, feckless fool that I am, out of these three – poetry, physics, and story – I hope to translate glare into glory and to turn witnessing as salesmanship into witnessing as incarnation.

The first thing that physics tells us about light is that it can be reflected. Rays of light strike a shiny surface and bounce off again at the same angle. The shinier and the more impenetrable the surface, the better the reflection. If God is light, and if we are to be the "light of the world," then that would mean we act as reflectors, mirrors of the Father of Lights.

The story in Exodus seems to endorse the mirroring process. "When Moses came down from Mount Sinai [where he had asked to see the glory of God], he was not aware that his face was radiant because he had spoken with the LORD. When Aaron and all the Israelites saw Moses, his face was radiant, and they were afraid to come near him." Hence, the veil. In the most popular interpretation of this story, one that Paul picks up again in 2 Cor. 3 where he declares that under the new covenant we will all "reflect the Lord's glory" with "unveiled faces," Moses's veil is designed to hide the reflected glory of God, which is too intense, too terrifying for the Israelites to face.

The glory of God as unbearable glare. Human beings cannot tolerate too much light, because they are tinged with darkness. All through the Old Testament, the Shekinah Glory of God appears only intermittently, veiled in cloud, shrouded in smoke, concealed behind a heavy curtain – always dangerous. When Moses daringly demands to see the glory of God, God replies, "No one may see me and live." Moses had to be hidden in a rock and shielded by God's hand and allowed only a brief glance at the glory already gone by. To quote Emily Dickinson again,

Tell all the truth but tell it slant  
Success in circuit lies  
Too bright for our infirm delight  
The truth's superb surprise

As lightning to the children eased  
With explanation kind

The truth must dazzle gradually  
Or every man be blind

And we are to be mirrors to reflect the dangerous light of truth? The mirror image makes me uneasy. You see, the virtue of a mirror lies in its impenetrability. Light remains external to the mirror; if it is a good mirror, it will transmit the light unchanged, perhaps even intensified and narrowed. Any mischievous child (of whatever age) knows what to do with a mirror and a light. Mirrors are hard, superficial, essentially interchangeable with any other mirror.

Margaret Atwood, in one of her more angry poems about the relationship between men and women, pictures the role of a young woman as that of a mirror to her egocentric male partner who wants only to have himself reflected back to him, larger than life. "Mirrors are the perfect lovers," the woman mutters bitterly, and then rebelliously cries out, "There is more to a mirror / than you looking at / your full-length body / flawless but reversed, / . . . Think about the frame. / The frame is carved, it is important, / it exists, it does not reflect you, / . . . it has limits and reflections of its own. / There's a nail in the back / to hang it with; there are several nails, / think about the nails, / pay attention to the nail / marks in the wood, / they are important too."

Atwood here writes beyond her original intention to expose narcissistic exploitation in relationships. Her insight that a mirror is more than reflection leads her to the meaning of suffering and to the importance of God-given individuality. The reference to the nail marks catches our breath. Did Christ reflect, mirror-like, the glory of God? Or did he, framed in human flesh, have "limits and reflections" of his own? What about that frame, with its nail marks? When truth, told slant, enters the framework, is reflection alone adequate to explain what happens?

Once again, I turn to physics for help. You see, unless light is slanted or bent in some way we cannot see it at all. And when light is bent, as it is by earth's atmosphere, broken into wavelengths or refracted, it reveals colour. Pure light holds all color within it and is forever on the verge of breaking into color at the slightest change of angle and imperfection of surface. And color has always had a tendency toward beauty and design. Color intrinsically means something (even computer-generated attempts at randomness turn out to become infinitely

receding designs), and the play of color touches something deep within us – “heavenly hurt it gives us . . . where the meanings are.” Prisms, rainbows, diamonds, dew-drops. We are attracted by possibility, by variety, by infinite color and design. Light is thus the opposite of black which absorbs all colors and makes them disappear. Conformity is not godliness! Black holes in space are pure nothingness and absorb into nothingness whatever nears them.

To return then to the Light of the World – to the very origin of Light that in the beginning stood against chaos and formlessness and black holes – how was the Glory of God to be revealed to shadowy and shadowed human beings with weak eyes? Through incarnation – the prism of human flesh. We cannot see pure light unless it be broken. As W.B. Yeats once observed through the persona of a derelict old woman named Crazy Jane, “Nothing can be sole or whole . . . / That has not been rent.” The One who is Light has been broken, refracted through the humanity and suffering of Jesus. Unbearable light has been turned into flesh with its shadows and edges and curves and opacity. Holiness enfleshed, made touchable. Glory refracted painfully into goodness.

When Moses, desperate in his need for God’s presence, demanded to see the glory of God, God’s reply was not only the warning, “No one can see my face and live,” but also, “I will make my goodness pass before you.” There is a possibility, I am told by a scholar of the Old Testament, that the Hebrew word that has always been translated “radiance” could mean disfigured. Moses is indeed marked indelibly by his encounter with glory even though, or perhaps especially because, the glory has been refracted into goodness. Divine goodness leaves nothing the same as it was. The veil hides the burnt face of Moses, which the people could not look at. Likewise Jesus is scarred by his change from glory into goodness, becoming the suffering servant the prophets described as one from whom we would hide our faces.

What does it mean for us to let our light shine? Not carrying a candle as I once thought, some light outside of myself, leaving me untouched and others blinded. The mirror image will not do – unless we take into full account the brokenness of the one we are to reflect. The “truth must dazzle gradually” and the light be slanted through us, through the cracks and disfigurements and broken edges, what glass workers or potters call crazing. Look not to be an untouched, unmoved mirror. Aspire rather to be what poet George Herbert

called “a brittle, crazy glass” that will refract the Light of the World into a pattern of beauty, a design of goodness, that only you can produce – so that “others may see your good deeds and give glory to your Father in heaven.”

There is a third physical quality of light for which I have no object. The physics of incarnation has no easy symbol. I feel as if I walk in mystery here, a mystery I have only glimpsed briefly, but neither understood nor lived. Light can be reflected; it can be refracted. It also radiates – but this changes us from an object, a mirror or a prism, to a source. Did not Christ say, “You are the light of the world?”

Radiate – that means to emit light from a center. We’ve come to use the picture of rays of light streaming out from a central source to describe people who radiate joy or life or love. If we return to our story of Moses we read that “his face was radiant,” something he was not even aware of. “His face was radiant because he had spoken with the LORD.” He calls the people to come to him and not to be afraid. After he speaks with them, he puts the veil on his face. This process is apparently repeated: “Whenever Moses entered the LORD’s presence to speak with him, he removed the veil until he came out. And when he came out and told the Israelites what he had been commanded, they saw that his face was radiant. Then Moses would put the veil back over his face until he went in to speak with the LORD.” Why the veil? Some suggest that it was to conceal from the people the fading inner light, which needed a re-encounter with the God of glory to be rekindled.

The central teaching of the gospels and the epistles is that Christ is in us. Already in Ezekiel comes the poignant promise, “I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh.” Such an inner transformation is possible because Jesus first laid aside his glory and took on a heart of flesh within a body of flesh – light/truth incarnated, translated into goodness made known in suffering, ultimately on the cross. Having come down into humanity, Jesus then begins the process of drawing humanity up into God: “I will ask the Father and he will give you another Counselor to be with you forever – the Spirit of truth. . . . you know him, for he lives with and will be in you . . . . In that day you will realize that I am in my Father, and you are in me and I am in you.” Thus Paul could describe his experience as “I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God.”

We have too often, I think, understood that teaching to mean a negation of the self that we were truly meant to be. We have thought mirrors, unthinking, bouncers-back of light that in themselves are nothing and are practically indistinguishable from one another. We have forgotten about the frame with its own nail marks. "The life I live in the body" means incarnation. Spirit lived through the flesh, the particular bodies of each of us. Prisms refracting Light and becoming sources of light, each one a unique, colorful, radiant "yes" flung against the blackness of nothingness and meaningless conformity.

Let me turn again to the congregation of poets for help, this time Gerard Manley Hopkins, a man of God who initially thought that his entrance into holy orders meant giving up his gift of poetry and becoming a priest like other priests. That surely was the expected denial of self and proper service. Only after years of suffering through the suppression of what God had given him in the first place did he recover the freedom to write. Out of his struggle to understand the meaning of grace, out of his descents into depression and despair, comes his particular voice, not quite like any other poet's, yet akin to that of the Psalmists who gave us their unvarnished experiences of the Holy One. Hopkins's unique contribution is his powerful belief that each person, each animal, each thing is highly individualized and different from all other things, so much so that each object is to him almost a separate species and the world is full of selves, each with its own unique God-given essence. "The world is charged with the grandeur of God," he declares in his most famous poem. In another poem, he turns *self* into a verb – *selves*, an action that each of us does by letting the inmost being ring out like a bell. In his journal he wrote, "all things therefore are charged with God, and if we know how to touch them give off sparks and take fire, yield drops and flow, ring and tell of Him."

Here is that same insight, in poetry:

As kingfishers catch fire, dragonflies draw flame;  
As tumbled over rim in roundy wells  
Stones ring; like each tucked string tells, each hung bell's  
Bow swung finds tongue to fling out broad its name;  
Each mortal thing does one thing and the same:  
Deals out that being indoors each one dwells;

Selves – goes itself; *myself* it speaks and spells,  
Crying *What I do is me: for that I came.*

I say more: the just man justices;  
Keeps grace: that keeps all his goings graces;  
Acts in God's eye what in God's eye he is –  
Christ – for Christ plays in ten thousand places,  
Lovely in limbs, and lovely in eyes not his  
To the Father through the features of men's faces.  
– Gerard Manley Hopkins (1882)

That final picture of God as the audience in a theatre in which Christ plays himself in other people's bodies delights me. Imagine: you and I are actors in a divine comedy, improvising with others, revealing Christ within us to the applause of God and all the other human actors who have already completed all their scenes. Somehow that reduces the terror and dread seriousness of "let your light so shine before others." May I paraphrase, "let your colors so play before all audiences that they too will join in"?

Reflection, refraction, radiance – the physics of incarnation really implies all three. Since I have been made into a new creation with Christ in the very center of me, what I need to do is to live out of that center, looking up always to the source of Light. Mirrors and prisms do only what they are. They serve – what they do is be. Let your light so shine – keep grace – keep all your goings graces – act in God's eye what in God's eye you are – the light of the world.

## Notes

Sources quoted are from the following.

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