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Sermon  
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Park Congregational Church  
Worcester, Massachusetts

“Enlightened by the Morning Star”

Text: 2 Peter 1:16-21

Dear people of God, the gathering of believers are only a few, not anything like it was two or three generations ago when the church was packed. The wider culture has become very secularized, believing in an assortment of religions, including some based on rather bizarre spiritual practices, and quite a few do not hold to any form of religious belief. Sunday is treated like any other day of the week. People conduct business, they go shopping, they use the day for entertainment and diversion. Even some of the few faithful who still attend worship services are not sure anymore that they believe in the basic tenets of their faith, such as the return of Jesus Christ to earth.

No, I’m not talking about the situation today in many churches. I’m talking about the time when the Second Letter of Peter was written, about a century after Christ was raised from the dead.

The church had been around long enough that they were having trouble with people who were distorting the truth of the Gospel. In this

case, they were refusing to believe in the Second Coming so this letter is written to encourage them to believe what they had been taught.

The author is addressing a group who had lived long enough after Jesus's day to have given up believing that Christ would return soon. Two generations of Christians had now died, and still Christ had not come back.

We often assume that those who lived closer to Jesus's time had a big advantage over the rest of us today, who are almost 2000 years away from the decisive events of our faith. I think that this is the wrong way of looking at it. Those in the early church may have had the benefit of eyewitnesses instructing them, but we today have the benefit of history.

Many of us, I'm sure, often wish that we had lived at the same time that Jesus did. If only we could have been there to hear Jesus preach and to see him heal, then, we assume, it would be so easy to believe. But today, we think, we are so far removed from Jesus's day and time that doubts creep into our minds.

This is a misguided way of looking at it. I was telling the Bible Study group Thursday night that we have the benefit of scholarship that actually helps us to understand better the situation of Jesus's time than those who wrote the New Testament. I was explaining how the Gospel

writers frequently confuse the Pharisees and the Sadducees. In several passages, Pharisees are often blamed as the culprits who opposed the ministry of Jesus when in fact it was the Sadducees who were the wrongdoers.

Scholars have been able to uncover the mistakes of many generations who have gone before us, all the way back to the New Testament writers. We can avail ourselves today of their research and thereby delve into the meaning of much of what Jesus said and did and what really happened to him on the cross better than those who were eyewitnesses to those events.

This research has been uncovered because of the illumination of the Morning Star, who is the living Jesus Christ. Now we must be careful not to accept just any so-called biblical scholarship. Many scholars are mistaken in much of what they write. But historians have a way of getting at the truth in a way that theologians sometimes miss. That's why we need both historians and theologians to help us to uncover the truth.

Whoever the writer of 2<sup>nd</sup> Peter was, he understood that the message of scripture is like “a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns, and the morning star arises in your hearts” (2 Peter 1:19). It is ultimately Jesus Christ himself, through the testimony of the Holy Spirit,

who shines the truth into our hearts so that we know what to believe. We must be attentive to the overall redemptive message contained in the Bible if we are ever really going to see the light.

This reference to the day dawning and the morning star rising in our hearts informs us that our understanding grows slowly as the sun travels slowly over the horizon each morning. Understanding does not occur in one giant burst of enlightenment, but we must study the Bible diligently throughout our days if we're to comprehend its meaning for our lives. In that sense, we never graduate from Sunday School. We never graduate from Confirmation. We never graduate from Bible Study. I have a Ph.D. and three Master's degrees and I still need to study God's Word. I still need to be enlightened by the Morning Star. The message contained in the Bible is inexhaustible. There's always something more that we can learn.

Reference to the "morning star" is found in several passages in the Bible. Numbers 24:17 says, "A star will come out of Jacob." Jesus was descended from Judah, one of Jacob's sons. In the Book of Revelation, Jesus is called the "morning star." It states, "To everyone who conquers and continues to do my works to the end . . . I will give the morning star" (Revelation 2:26,28). Later in the book it says, "It is I, Jesus, who sent

my angel to you with this testimony for the churches. I am the root and the descendant of David, the bright morning star” (Revelation 22:16).

Though each of us has our own interpretation of the Bible, our Sermon Lesson this morning tells us that we must allow our interpretation to be illuminated by the Morning Star, who is Jesus Christ, rising in our hearts. The inspiration of scripture can be compared to atomic radiation. When an atomic bomb explodes, the area right at the center of the explosion is known as “Ground Zero.” The radiation permeates everything near the place where the explosion occurs. As we move farther and farther from Ground Zero, the amount of radiation decreases and decreases until it becomes hardly measurable.

Jesus was the Ground Zero of God’s breaking into our world. And the Bible was inspired because those who wrote it were near enough to Jesus’s explosion to absorb his radiation. While no one can write a theological document today and expect it to be added to the Bible, we shouldn’t think that the only Christians who were inspired with Christ’s message were the writers of the New Testament. There have been many throughout the centuries who were also enlightened by the Morning Star, through whose writings the light of Jesus radiated.

Each Sunday at the end of the reading of my Sermon Lesson, we all

respond by shouting, “And God is still speaking.” This is a quotation from Pastor John Robinson as the Pilgrims were preparing to sail from the Netherlands to America. The beloved shepherd of his flock, wishing them God’s blessings as he was not going to make the trip with them aboard the *Mayflower*, said, “There is yet more light and truth to break forth from God’s Holy Word.” And so, the United Church of Christ has adopted as our motto, based on Pastor Robinson’s words, “God is still speaking.” Yes, indeed, God is still speaking through the Bible with new interpretations.

Some Christians believe that they don’t interpret the Bible. They just take it at its word. There’s no such thing. Maybe it would be a lot easier if we could just accept the Bible that way. But we can’t. We all interpret the Bible. Even the person who takes the Bible literally. That person interprets the Bible literally. A literal interpretation is just that--an interpretation, which is no more trustworthy or dependable just by virtue of its being literal than any other interpretation. There’s much in the Bible whereby if we interpret it literally, we misinterpret it. For example, Jesus says in the Sermon on the Mount, “If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away; it is better for you to lose one of your members than for your whole body to be thrown into hell. And if

your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away; it is better for you to lose one of your members than for your whole body to go into hell” (Matthew 5:29-30). Even hardcore fundamentalist Christians don’t walk around with one eye and one hand, having interpreted these verses literally. Jesus is obviously using exaggeration here to make a point.

We must read the Bible through the light given to us by the Morning Star, who is Jesus. He will show us the right interpretation for our lives. And it might be an interpretation that differs from that of the writer of the biblical passage. Jesus often corrected the interpretation of the Old Testament writers. In the Sermon on the Mount, he said, “You have heard that it was said, ‘An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.’ But I say to you, Do not resist an evildoer” (Matthew 5:38-39). Jesus was a creative and imaginative teacher who often felt the need to interpret the scriptures in new ways for his day. We must do the same. As we will recite in a few minutes during the Communion liturgy, “The United Church of Christ . . . affirms the responsibility of the Church in each generation to make this faith its own in reality of worship, in honesty of thought and expression, and in purity of heart before God.” We do this by interpreting and reinterpreting our faith so that it is relevant to each new generation of believers.

God gives us the freedom and responsibility to interpret the Bible. This doesn't mean that we can interpret it any way we want. We must interpret it according to the light shed upon it by the Morning Star, Jesus Christ. We cannot help but to interpret the Bible. There's no other way to find any meaning in it. That's true of everything we read. Everything we read must be interpreted, even something as simple as a doctor's prescription, "Take one pill twice daily." Most of us, I hope, would interpret that prescription literally. If we don't, we might become very ill. But it still needs to be interpreted. There's no immediate comprehension of any words or symbols or numbers that can bypass interpretation. Ask a physicist what  $1 + 1 = 2$  means in the realm of quantum theory and relativity theory. You might be surprised! Since we cannot bypass interpretation, let's make sure that we interpret in the light of the Morning Star.

I came across an anonymous poem comparing the Bible to the TV Guide. It goes like this:

They lie on the table side by side

The Holy Bible and the TV Guide.

One is well worn and cherished with pride.

Not the Bible but the TV Guide.

One is used daily to help folks decide.  
No, not the Bible, but the TV Guide.  
As the pages are turned, what shall they see?  
Oh, what does it matter, turn on the TV.  
So they open the book in which they confide.  
No, not the Bible, but the TV Guide.  
The Word of God is seldom read.  
Maybe a verse before they fall into bed.  
Exhausted and sleepy and tired as can be.  
Not from reading the Bible, from watching TV.  
So then back to the table side by side,  
Lie the Holy Bible and the TV Guide.  
No time for prayer, no time for the Word,  
The plan of salvation is seldom heard.  
But forgiveness of sin, so full and free,  
Is found in the Bible, not on TV.

Jesus is the heart of God's revelation. In him all that God wants to tell us, ask from us, and be to us is concentrated. He is the Morning Star who enlightens us through the Bible. Amen.