

Laterna Absconsa (*The Sacramental Christian*)

4th in the series:

Christus Paradox: Oxymorons for Christian Living

*The sun shall no more be your light by day,
nor for brightness shall the moon give you light:
But the LORD shall be for you a light everlasting.*
(Isaiah 60:19, KJV)

A sermon by Siegfried S. Johnson on the 17th Sunday after Pentecost, **October 1, 2017**

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Today's message is the fourth in my five sermon series, *Christus Paradox*. *Christus* is Christ, whose very existence is the ultimate paradox, the One both divine and human, both eternal Word and temporal flesh, both Alpha and Omega. Jesus spoke of his yoke being easy and his burden light, two opposite images which are obvious oxymorons, and for me the spark that enticed me toward writing a series about *Oxymorons for Christian Living*. We've seen Jesus to be a master of such paradoxical, oxymoronic teaching with such sayings as "*the one who seeks his life will lose it and the one losing his life for my sake will find it.*" I'll add this morning another saying of Jesus which comes to us on the wings of paradox, "*Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you.*"

Each week we've had a bit of fun with some witty oxymoronical statements, and this morning I'll add yet a few more. Playwright Alan Bennett said, in an oxymoron most apropos to the political climate of the moment, "*I'm in favor of free expression, provided it's kept rigidly under control.*" Winston Churchill said, "*There's a lot of terrible lies going about in the world, and the worst of it that half of them are true.*" Then there's the anonymous baseball player, jealous of the ambidexterity of a teammate who could bat from both sides of the plate. He said to a reporter, "*I'd give my right arm to be ambidextrous.*" And finally, Danish physicist Niels Bohr, "*If you aren't confused by quantum physics, you haven't really understood it.*"

I'll let that oxymoron from the arena of physics lead us to today's message, since our text from Isaiah presents a mystery in the realm of physics: "*The sun shall no more be your light by day, nor for brightness shall the moon give you light.*" How is that possible?

The spectacular image on the next page is a deep space photograph capturing an event 83 million miles from earth. It was taken twelve years ago, on Independence Day, July 4, 2005, sixty-seven seconds after NASA's 820 pound probe, *Deep Impact*, slammed into a comet the size of Manhattan called Tempel 1, taking its name from Wilhelm Tempel, who first discovered it in

1867. A Jupiter-family comet orbiting the sun every 5½ earth years, NASA planned this head-on rendezvous for Independence Day in order to add to the fireworks of American scientific pride, the impact releasing enormous energy in a bright splash of light. Light is streaming forth where there was none before, though it was always there, hidden deep within the energy locked inside a cold, dark mass hurtling through space.



Laterna Absconsa is a Latin phrase meaning, "Hidden Light." *Laterna* evolved into our word, "lantern," and *absconsa* (hidden) can yet be found in our word, *absconded*. So, with that bit of etymology I welcome you to another example of the *Christus Paradox*, how Christ himself, who said "I am the Light of the World," is the light everlasting.

I've saved this oxymoron intentionally for World Communion Sunday, hoping to aim your focus not so much on the pulpit and the Word, but rather to direct your attention to the Holy Table, to the sacrament we share today with other Christ-followers around the world. I hope this message will enable us as we approach the Lord's Table and break the bread, to experience a different sort of *Deep Impact*, one releasing holy light in the same way the Emmaus disciples' eyes were open to recognize Jesus in the breaking of the bread.

Hiding light is contradictory to light's nature, an oxymoron Jesus himself referred to when he taught in the Sermon on the Mount, "You are the light of the world. No one after lighting a lamp puts it under a bushel basket, but on a lampstand, and it gives light to the whole house." Indeed, why light a lantern only to drape a veil over it? Yet, ancient rabbinical tradition suggests God did that very thing. "In the beginning," when the world was without form and void, the Spirit of God *moved* (perhaps better, "rippled" or "sparked") over the face of the waters.

The image gained from Genesis 1 is not different essentially from our image of Tempel 1, a cold, dead mass sparked by contact with an outside source, the *Ruach Elohim* (Spirit of God). What's described in the Genesis narrative, then, is a *Deep Impact* unleashing of hidden energy.

Rabbi Menachem Schneerson writes of a rabbinic tradition surrounding Genesis 1, how that tradition grapples with the confusing order of the Genesis narrative. Since the first thing created on day one is light ("Let there be light!"), one must square this with the fact that the creation of sun and moon doesn't occur until day three.

This vein of rabbinic mysticism suggests that since the creation of light was inexplicably prior to the creation of sun and moon, God immediately hid the light he had created, a purposeful

Laterna Absconsa to be known only by the righteous in the world to come. Hints of that *Laterna Absconsa*, they say, can be seen in the light radiating from the Torah scroll.

In Christian thought, the *Laterna Absconsa* may be understood as light radiating, not from the Torah as the written word, but from the Living Word that became flesh. I love how the Nicene Creed states it. “*We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ, the only Son of God, eternally begotten of the Father, God from God, Light from Light . . .*”



What an interesting phrase, “*Light from light*” or, perhaps better translated, “*Light beyond light.*”

Certainly this is the thrust of Isaiah’s words, “*there will be no night, no need of lamp or sun, for the LORD God will be the light everlasting,*” and from Revelation 21, “*the city has no need of sun or moon to shine on it, for the glory of God is its light, and its Lamp is the Lamb.*” This is *Light beyond Light*, a light which, though hidden was always there.

The apostle Paul expounds on this in his 2nd letter to the church at Corinth. “*For it is God who said, ‘Let light shine out of darkness,’ who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.*” Paul then writes, “*We have this treasure in clay jars.*” Have the clay jars of our bodies hidden this creative treasure, so that within us is a *Laterna Absconsa*? Can it be that divine energy pulses within these clays jars, however deep within, as a *Laterna Absconsa* waiting to be released at some impact point, some moving of the Spirit rippling over us and sparking life?

Paul makes it clear in this passage that as our bodies are losing energy and vitality, this hidden treasure begins a process of renewal, the *Laterna Absconsa* within us coming to light. No wonder Paul says, “*So we do not lose heart. Even though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed day by day. For this slight momentary affliction is preparing us for an eternal weight of glory beyond all measure, because we look not at what can be seen, but at what cannot be seen; for what can be seen is temporary, but what cannot be seen is eternal.*”

Through the eyes of faith Paul teaches that just as the clay jar of our body appears to be going dark, another light, essential to our Being is re-emerging, a light streaming forth where there was none before.

The Holy Table on this World Communion Sunday embodies that mystery of light from the darkness of death. Jesus, during the meal on the night he was betrayed took the loaf and said, “*This is my body.*” This loaf looks a bit like Comet Tempel, doesn’t it? I suggest to you that a *Deep Impact* with this loaf, this body, released *Laterna Absconsa*, a Hidden Light. The thorn of crowns pressed into his brow. The nails pounded into his hands and feet. The spear thrust into his side. These moments of *Deep Impact*, I believe, released a light of love and salvation into the world.

This morning, as you receive the bread, I hope you can envision yourself as a lifeless clay jar, and imagine that in that moment of Deep Impact – the bread in your hands – the Hidden Light within you streams forth to all the world.

Sources and notes:

“*A Hidden Illumination*,” an essay by Rabbi Menachem M. Schneerson in *PARABOLA* (Summer 2001, Light).

