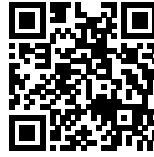




COME, LIGHT

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Something extraordinary happened one morning in December 2020.

When he got up the night was still lingering in the sky. London plane trees, so doleful in the rain, were still dripping. The ground below was piled thick with soggy leaves, and a dull foreboding hung in the air.

Shards of streetlights shone on the wet asphalt. It looked as though the rain was about to end.

The day before Christmas in London in the year of the pandemic, Shifa thought to himself. The year of sorrow and dejection. The preceding few days things had gotten even gloomier. Every now and then an ambulance would dart through the deserted streets with sirens wailing. Hospitals were over-stretched, the news said, and the city cemeteries were just about full.

He had been reading Daniel Defoe's account of the bubonic plague that scourged the city in 1665. About cartloads of dead being dumped into mass graves and about some, still alive, screaming and clawing out of the shallow pits. A brutal record of the fright, the deaths, the stench, the greed, and of the evil lurking in men as the pestilence ravaged the city.

A gnawing awareness of a similar agony—of having seen the horror and of a solemnity of being still alive—rippled through Shifa's mind. The old plague lay mingled with the spectre of the present.

The weather too had been miserable. For weeks torrents of rain whipped up by gusty winds had been blighting the country, causing severe flooding in places. The lockdown had made everyone forget that a year consisted of four seasons. That there were nights and days of varying lengths and temperatures. That the once familiar outdoor still displayed facets of beauty and changing vistas.

Sickness, convalescence, separation across continents. Misery had struck his family too as it had so many others. There would be no Christmas celebration this year.

It was Thursday, the day of luminous mysteries. Shifa took out his rosary and sat down facing the charcoal sky. Slowly his eyelids closed.

By the time he finished the third decade Shifa had sunk into a rhythm of repetition. Praying the rosary for him sometimes turned into an unconscious and vague ritual. This morning, however, he was curiously alert as he came to the fourth decade. The mystery of the transfiguration. With blinkered eyes he tried to imagine how the illumined face of the teacher might have looked like to the apostles assembled on the bald mountain that night.

It was then that he was shaken by the irony. To meditate on a body made up of blood, flesh, and bones transforming itself into light—on a day like this? How could one contemplate light when the earth was awash in blinding darkness?

With eyes shut he whispered all this to himself. Drowned earth. Denuded trees, barren gardens, empty streets. Overhead a pouring sky. Wake up. Shed off your stupor.

Fingers still clasping the beads Shifa opened his eyes, and an unearthly beauty greeted him. The sun had pierced through the clouds, and a pale golden hue lay diffuse in the glistening air. Bewitched, he watched a curtain of liquid, diaphanous gold silently settling on grey, red, and beige buildings.

The leafless skeleton of the majestic tree of paradise across the window stood sheathed in a preternatural luster.

This was transfiguration, it occurred to him. Light had entered the darkness, gently spreading its silken luminosity. As it increased in brightness, the glow turned the earth itself into its glory. It appeared as though the world was being consecrated by an act of benediction promising the return of hope to a saddened world.

Ezekiel had once encountered the glory of God. "As the appearance of the rainbow in the clouds on a rainy day," said the prophet, "so was the appearance of the surrounding radiance." And he continued, "Such was the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the Lord. And when I saw it, I fell on my face." (Ezekiel 1:28).

What a mystery light is!

"It is a universal, firmly-held opinion, the very voice of nature," wrote Marsilio Ficino in 1493, "[that nothing is more beautiful to behold, nothing more lovable, nothing more astonishing than light.](#)"

Scientists say about 80% of our experiences are visual. The eye's response to light constitutes our external reality and thus determines our interactions with the world. Yet "What is light?" [never elicits a simple answer](#), writes Glenn Stark in the *Encyclopedia Britannica*, because light is "experienced, explored, and exploited" in so many contexts that its literal meaning is inextricable from the metaphorical.

The English language is especially rich with its nuances. The sun lets us see the world and helps us know it. The mind *enlightens* us with understanding. Visions and inspiration help us gain *insight*.

Even a scientist, while observing light's nature (its impacts and interactions with objects), must walk a tightrope between the opposite properties of light: particles and waves. Others - theologians, poets, philosophers - often imagine light in paradoxes.

In art, two painters rarely approach it from similar angles, even though what they paint mostly is light. Renaissance master Vincenzo Catena ("[Saint Jerome in his study](#)") painted it coming directly from its source, the sun, illuminating the world as it did the saint in his study. For both the saint and the painter, the direct trajectory of light, increasing in brightness until it attained the perfect brilliance and clarity, emanated from God, its true origin. For George Seurat, on the other hand, the interplay of tiny [contrasting strokes of colours](#) (or particles) nearly invisible to the naked eye, made up the lustrous domain of light that enwrapped objects and things. The source of light for him was in the environs.

So, what is light?

The illumination we encounter as visible light is the effect on our environment of the sun's radiation, or electromagnetic spectrum, as science calls it. This spectrum is made up of waves of energy the star dissipates over the universe continuously. On one end of the spectrum pulsate immensely destructive gamma rays with less than an atom of space between waves; on the other undulate radio waves that have thousands of miles of distance between crests.

All this radiation is hostile to life. Yet somewhere near the middle of its length is a tiny portion (less than

1%) of the spectrum that becomes supremely benign.

It is bizarre why this minuscule segment of deadly radiation should soften itself, but it does. As it enters the earth's atmosphere the electromagnetic spectrum attains the wavelength of the extremely narrow range of 0.3 to 14 microns (a micron is a millionth of a meter). This range, writes author and scientist James Le Fanu in "[Here comes the all-powerful sun.](#)" is so narrow within the entire spectrum that, by analogy, it takes up just "a few seconds" in a timespan 100 million times longer than the 4.6 billion years since the Big Bang, or the beginning of our solar system.

As our planet wakes up to greet the sun in the morning, an incredibly small amount of radiation is extracted, as if by some invisible hands, from the massive body of deadly destruction and turned gently into life-generating munificence.

Michelangelo's "[Separation of Light from Darkness](#)" in the Sistine Chapel celebrates this drama as narrated in Genesis 1:2-3. We see a colossal God separating swirling white gases from surrounding darkness with his enormous, sinewy hands, thus initiating creation. It brings to memory Isaiah's words: it is God who "forms the light and creates darkness" (45:7).

From this moment on, a new story more breathtaking than an Arabian tale begins to take shape.

During those few *seconds* that it touches the sleepy earth, the radiation turns itself into visible light and its companion heat, setting off the cycle of life. Working in tandem with the earth's orbit, its daily turning on the axis, and the planet's tilt towards the sun, light creates a unique orchestra by arranging time's endless permutations of varying lengths of night and day.

Fecundity follows. Light translates time into seasons of tilling, growing, and harvesting. Into seasons of courtship, nesting, and raising fledglings. Light makes life possible and ensures that the mystery continues. For the sake of the princess Scheherazade and the king inside the palace as well as for the ladybug in the garden.

The farmer casts the seed in the ground, the gospel tells us, but "knows not how the earth bringeth forth fruit of herself; first the blade, then the ear, after that the full corn in the ear." (Mark 4:28). It is the benevolent hand of light that waves the magic wand.

The spectacle carries on. The beam that descends on treetops, mountain peaks, oceans and rivers also lights up fireworks in our brains. Electrical nerve impulses generated by the reflected light tell our brains how to detect objects, colours, shapes, dimensions, and textures. We acknowledge, differentiate, classify, and interpret images by comparing them with old images stored in our memories.

As the light creates sparkles and ripples on a stream or paints the wings of a butterfly it is only the human eye that can capture this panorama. Through the lenses of our eyes, only we can witness the rainbow of the seven hues.

There is more.

Light keeps time and measures distance in the universe. Whether fathoming the vastness of space or reading the faces of our digital devices, we return to light to get our bearing. Scientists measure the distance of galaxies, from us and among themselves, by the speed of light. And when an object acquires the speed of light, they say, it becomes infinite.

There is an instructive episode in the Venerable Bede's [history of English kings and churches](#).

A courtier in the Anglo-Saxon king Edwin's castle compares the life of a man to the swift flight of a sparrow through the king's banquet hall on a winter night. The king sits at supper with friends and family while the fire blazes and the storms rage abroad. The sparrow flies in at one door and immediately out at another. While the bird is within the warm hall, he is safe from the wintry tempest, but then he vanishes out of everybody's sight, passing from winter to winter again.

"Such is the life of man," says the courtier to the king, "appearing for a little while in the well-lit and warm banquet hall, but what follows or what went before we know nothing at all."

Like Bede's sparrow flitting through the warm hall on a wintry night, light, traveling at a speed of 300,000 km a second takes a little over eight minutes to traverse ninety-two million miles before reaching the earth, the banquet hall of life.

Unlike the sparrow, however, this radiant visitor quickens life, clothes nature, replenishes granaries and

then leaves everything behind. Back into the vast endlessness. Whence it comes we know but where it goes in the end, we do not.

The first act of God narrated in the Bible was the creation of light. "Let there be light" said God, 'and there was light" (Genesis 1:3).

This light, created "when the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while the Spirit of God swept over the face of the waters" (Genesis 1:2), became the icon of divinity in human imagination. This surreal picture of the beginning has been the enduring anchor for our physical and moral understanding of the world as well as of our relationships with it.

Following the gospels, apostolic narratives and patristic traditions, Christian theology has from its inception understood the transfiguration of Jesus to be the revelation of the glory of God. The accounts appearing in Matthew, Mark and Luke are remarkable: "There he was transfigured before them. His face shone like the sun, and his clothes became as white as the light." "There he was transfigured before them. His clothes became dazzling white, whiter than anyone in the world could bleach them," and "As he was praying, the appearance of his face changed, and his clothes became as bright as a flash of lightning." Later, Peter spoke of having been an eyewitness of Christ's "magnificence" (2 Peter 1: 16-18). In his gospel as well as in the first epistle, John described God as light.

The significance of these accounts lies primarily in the transcendental impact of light. The apostles do not merely refer to their visual susceptibility; they allude to the event's transformative impact. St Paul articulates this transformation most eloquently in his letter to the Ephesians: "But everything exposed by the light becomes visible—and everything that is illuminated becomes a light" (5:13).

One of the earliest Church fathers, Saint Irenaeus, also described the transfiguration by establishing a correspondence between the glory of God, the vision of God and the life of man. "[T]he glory of God is a live human being, and a truly human life is the vision of God."

Light perceived in this way can lead to a sea-change in the heart of a man. It may rekindle a novel awareness of God; it may even lead to an experience comparable to Saul's on the road to Damascus. After all, he was blinded by intense light.

Life transcendent. Is that not what transfiguration is? What else can turn an inert possibility into a living luminescence, if not light?

Pius Manutius is a husband, father, and traveler.

Featured image, "The Penitent Magdalen," by Georges de La Tour, painted ca. 1640.

