In the recent movie, *Magic in the Moonlight*, Colin Firth plays the role of the world’s most celebrated magician. He dazzles audiences with his sleight of hand and takes immense pleasure in his acts of deception. He knows he is the premier illusionist and credits it to both his superior intelligence and the shallowness of the masses.

He is a man of science and reason who believes everything can be explained rationally. His faith is 100% in the five senses and he rejects anything that smacks of mystery or spirituality.

His philosophy of “what-you-see-is-all-there-is” turns him cynical, obnoxious and rude. He constantly insults people who do not view the universe as he does, dismissing them as inferior. Many admire his skills as an entertainer and even his genius, but few people care for him as a human being. One exception is his fiancée who is a mirror image of him. She is his intellectual match and concurs with his purely rational, but also despairing, view of life.

However, our brilliant, rational cynic takes a mighty tumble when he becomes enamored with a not-as-bright, but delightful woman, who believes there is more to life than meets the eye. Rationally, he knows it makes no sense for him to have romantic feelings for her. Plus, it makes no logical sense for her to break off her engagement to a fabulously wealthy man who can provide her everything in the way of material luxury. But when she helps the cynic wake up to the beauty and enchantment of life, he knows – not in his brain, but in his heart – that he cannot live without her.

Although the movie ends when she accepts his marriage proposal, we are left believing that the transformation of our critical cynic to a positive and hopeful man is just beginning. Doors to an entirely new life are flinging open now that he recognizes that reason is helpful and necessary, but also limited. The things that make life rich are stirrings in the soul that cannot be grasped simply by mental prowess.

Today’s reading from the Gospel of John would surely have been skewered by our rational cynic prior to his transformation. John writes, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being.”

Our doubter of the divine would have scoffed, “Poppycock! It’s religious mumbo jumbo that makes no rational sense!”
A devout literalist, he would never have grasped the meaning behind the words. Our text reminds us that we must turn to poetry, metaphor and music to point to a mystery that is greater than mere words can explain.

Having just celebrated Christmas, the nativity stories in the gospels of Matthew and Luke still linger in our minds. We picture Mary and Joseph trekking to Bethlehem, the infant Jesus lying in the manger, the angels announcing his birth to the shepherds and the mysterious magi following a star to the babe of Bethlehem. However, reading the opening words of the Gospel of John jolts us into a very different sphere of thought.

John wants to take us back to the beginning. Not the beginning of the story when the angel Gabriel announces to Mary that she is going to give birth to a child, but back to the beginning of all that is. John takes us back before the creation of the first humans, back before the age of the dinosaurs, back before creatures of any kind. John takes us back before plant life, back before the mountains and valleys were formed, back before oceans appeared.

Do you know how some ninety year-olds like to joke that they are older than dirt? Well, John takes us back before dirt, back before our solar system came together and planets were caught in the gravitational pull of the sun. When John transports us back to the beginning, he is talking about a time before the Big Bang.

He writes, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being.” Then, a few verses later: “And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father’s only son full of grace and truth.” (John 1:14)

With his poetry about the Word, John urges us to contemplate the mystery behind the relationship of Jesus and God. Matthew and Luke use the virgin birth to describe the unique connection Jesus has with God. While all of us are sons and daughters of God, to describe Jesus as son is to describe a different reality. Jesus has a deeper bond and more harmonious relationship with God than anyone else.

Keep in mind the Gospel of John was written later than the gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke. John had more time to ponder the mystery of God’s unique presence in Jesus. He decided not to use Matthew and Luke’s birth stories. Perhaps they sounded too literal in describing a relationship that was beyond the grasp of human thought. So, John chose symbolic speech to communicate the relationship between Jesus and God.

John declares that the human being known as Jesus of Nazareth provides our best glimpse of God. Through his teaching and his manner of living, he is our window into the character of God.

Note that John does not conclude his description of Jesus as the Word by declaring that Jesus is the pre-existent Son of God through whom all things came into being. Continuing his poetry, John adds, “What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.”

John introduces the word darkness and uses this word in two ways. On one hand, darkness means suffering and evil – the hardships that rob life of its vitality. On the other, it means ignorance or misunderstanding – either an inability or an unwillingness to grasp the truth.

I find it helpful to intertwine these two meanings. Jesus enlightens us by helping us better comprehend the nature of God and what imbues life with vitality. Jesus gives us hope because he is victorious over the powers of darkness that rob us of the promise of better things to come.
When John says, “The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it,” it is a powerful and positive affirmation. But, don’t you wish the light would not only shine in the darkness, but would obliterate the darkness?

Most of the time, doesn’t it seem as if darkness is winning? When we think about the wars occurring around the planet, oppression, human trafficking, crime, mean-spiritedness…it feels as if the darkness has mauled the light and is running a victory lap. Don’t you wish the light would do away with the darkness once and for all? But, that would rob us of our freedom. Our choices would be an illusion and life would be drained of meaning.

A colleague (Scott Black Johnston) tells the story of “a seminary student who was preparing a lesson plan on the ninth chapter of Isaiah. ‘The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness – on them light has shined.’ The assignment was to figure out how to convey the power of that passage to others. The student decided to find the darkest place on campus. She scouted around until she found an old racquet ball court. To reach it, you had to go down 2 flights of stairs and through 2 sets of heavy doors. Once you entered the court, closed the heavy doors behind you and turned out the light, it was pitch black. It was scary dark. There was not a single photon bouncing around to make an impression on your retina. So, the student took her class down to that racquet ball court and sat them down around the edges of the room. She read the Isaiah passage: ‘You are a people who live in deep darkness’ and she flipped off the light. A few students gasped, and then it became very quiet. She waited. In the dark, they all waited. After five incredibly long and unbelievably dark minutes, she said, ‘those who lived in a land of deep darkness – on them light has shined.’ And with that, she struck a match and lit a candle. The small candle did not fill the entire room with light, but it changed things. With the flickering of the light, they could see each other. They could see faces, surprised faces, some faces streaked with tears. For those in deep darkness, a little light made all the difference.”

We can’t make it as dark as the racquet ball court, so I would like everyone to close your eyes and place your hands over your eyes. Blot out every bit of light. I want you to think of a dark episode in your life. [60 seconds of silence, then open your eyes]

God is not a mere match in a dark room, not simply a candle that will burn itself out in a short time. God is an eternal flame that burns in peoples’ hearts. That flame assures us that God is with us in the bleak episodes of life, God illumines our path through the shadowy maze of existence and God ignites hope for a better day.

John knew that all was not right with the world. He lived under the oppressive occupation of the Romans and was exiled to a cave on the tiny island of Patmos. There was no doubt in his mind that darkness was a formidable force. But, John also knew something else; something that is not always apparent. He knew that God is always with us and darkness will never extinguish the light of God.

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