

**SLD01.27.08 3<sup>rd</sup> Ordinary**  
**Emory Presbyterian Church**  
**Isaiah 9:1-4, Matthew 4:12-23**  
**Jill Oglesby Evans**

### **“Like Moths to a Flame?”**

You know the expression, “like a moth to a flame?” That’s what came to mind when I read today’s texts.

Here Matthew describes Jesus as a light for people who sit in shadows, a great light for all who sit in darkness. And not just for then, for Matthew, but for now, and for way before, back in Isaiah’s day; that light Isaiah was talking about, that was Jesus, too - the powerful, holy, light, the irresistible radiance that dispels the gloom of the suffering.

So no wonder such light-seeking disciples as Peter and Andrew, such passionate, impulsive sons of thunder like James and John, bee-line it, or more like, moth-line it, toward the spark of Jesus’ presence. How could they resist? No wonder when Jesus says “Follow me,” the four men drop what they’re doing, immediately, and head straight for Jesus’ divine emanation. Like moths to a flame.

Thing is, light-seeking behavior can be dangerous for moths. Even fatal. One step too close and...phht...moth flambé.

Have you ever wondered why these delicate, nocturnal, little winged creatures are so continuously and predictably drawn to a source that can destroy them? In an evolutionary scheme generally keyed to survival and propagation of the species, doesn’t a moth’s life-risking compulsion to fly toward the light seem rather odd?

Light, flame, fire – always seem to attract living creatures, but they can be dangerous, especially to moths. And to disciples.

Curious about the impulse, I googled the question, “Why are moths attracted to flame?” and arrived at a website written by one Cecil Adams called “The Straight Dope,” which describes itself as “fighting ignorance since 1973” (in parentheses: “it’s taking longer than we thought.”)<sup>1</sup> Turns out the question of why moths are drawn to flame has been a matter of considerable debate over the years.

Initially it was conjectured that the moon may have had something to do with moths’ attraction to light. “This so-called ‘light-compass theory’ held that moths used the moon as a navigational beacon. By keeping it at a constant angle to their direction of travel, they were supposedly able to fly in a straight line. The trouble for the moths came when they made their sightings on a close-up light source like a candle flame. Then, instead of heading in a straight line, they flew around the flame in an ever-narrowing spiral until finally, phhhht, moth flambé.”

Only moths don’t fly around lights in spirals. “This was shown by an ingenious bug researcher named Henry Hsiao who tethered moths to little styrofoam boats in a tiny artificial pond—don’t you love guys like this? --and tracked their flight as they headed toward a light source. What Hsiao found was that moths fly more or less straight toward a light *until they get up close*, at which point they veer off and circle around it at a more or less constant distance. They seldom actually touch the light.”

Other scientists claimed that, to the moth, “bright lights mean open space and open space means safety. But moths are nocturnal, and the night sky has no light

---

<sup>1</sup> [http://www.straightdope.com/classics/a5\\_038.html](http://www.straightdope.com/classics/a5_038.html)

sources anywhere near as bright as a porch light. Besides, why should a moth feel compelled to fly around the light in circles?

“Others argued that moths associate light with warmth. But ultraviolet lamps, which are much cooler than incandescent bulbs, attract more moths.

Once again, Dr. Hsiao to the rescue. Hsiao observed that “moths exhibit two kinds of behavior. **When they're distant from a light source (they're drawn to light from as far as 200 feet away), they make a beeline straight toward it.** Nobody really knows why. Maybe they've tumbled to the fact that lights mean people, and people mean: Wool sweaters! On an even more basic level, perhaps a light just means: Other moths! *Par-tay!*”

Regardless of why, moths will continually and intentionally aim for the light, until...they get close to it. At that point, a second behavior takes over, noted Hsiao. When a moth gets close to a light, they immediately start avoidance tactics. **”When a moth gets close to the light, a different kind of behavior takes over. Instead of being attracted to the light, the moth actually tries to avoid it.** Which makes sense when you think about it: to a creature of the night like a moth, daylight, and by extension, any bright light means danger.”

Still, interestingly, the moth doesn't fly directly away from the light. And why is that? Apparently there is **a peculiarity of vision common to all sighted creatures** called a Mach band. **A Mach band refers to the region surrounding a bright light that seems darker than any other part of the area.** Bright light/Mach band.

Hsiao conjectured that the moth's atom-sized brain figures that the darkest part of the sky is safest. So it circles the light to which it is drawn in the Mach band region,

usually at a radius of about one foot, depending on the species. Eventually either its momentum carries it away or it finds some dark corner to hole up in. Only once in a while, an accident occurs and well, you know what happens – moth flambé.

In short, Mr. Adams concludes, just like most other creatures, **moths like some light but not too much**. Their attraction to light is inexorable, but get too close and, well, they prefer circling in the safety of the adjacent darkness.

Looks like those first disciples following Jesus were more like moths to a flame than I'd realized.

Sure, Peter, Andrew, James and John perceive Jesus' radiance - the great light he casts on the darkness in which they sit – and sure, light-seekers that they are, they immediately they drop what they're doing and follow him. Jesus calls, the disciples answer. Jesus leads, the disciples follow. Like moths to a flame.

But also like moths to a flame, the disciples follow Jesus *just so far*. They're drawn to his light – it's irresistible – but they're not interested in being consumed by it. So the closer they get to Jesus' divine intent, the more the disciples veer away from his light and circle around him at a more or less constant distance. The more Jesus' transformative radiance threatens their existence, the more attractive the Mach band, the deep shadow surrounding his brightness, holds for them.

What else could explain how afraid the disciples become, despite Jesus' presence, in the face of a windstorm? How terrified, in the face of one of his miracles? How determinedly clueless in the face of one of his parables? How else to explain Peter sinking out of faithlessness; James and John fussing over foolishness? The disciples sleeping during Jesus' hour of need? What else but the shadow surrounding

Jesus' radiance produces Judas betrayal? *Peter's* betrayal? Thomas' doubt? All of their doubt? All of *our* doubt?

Just like moths to a flame, it appears Jesus' disciples like *some* light, but not *too* much. Who wouldn't be drawn to the power and promise of Jesus' call, some of us even enough to drop everything and rearrange our lives. Immediately. For a while.

Jesus' invitational radiance is irresistible. Almost. The people who sit in darkness see a great light. But we keep blinking. The Kingdom of God has come near, but most of us prefer not to get too near to it.

Which is probably just as well. For it doesn't take any disciple of Jesus Christ long to discover that, however seductive the light, light-seeking behavior can be risky. Dangerous. Even fatal, to the way things are.

You hear the call of Jesus, you follow him, sure, and faithfully, promptly. Just be careful you don't get torched. Feel free to fly more or less straight toward Jesus' light, until you get up close. Then, if you value your life as it is, you'd do well to veer off and circle around him at a more or less constant distance. You see that Mach band coming up, that dark region surrounding Christ's brightness, much safer to shift gears and use your momentum to carry you away, or find some dark corner to hole up in. 'Cause it may be the last sanctuary for the Self you know and love, your last chance to stay the same. One step closer and we're talking...phhht... disciple flambé.

Better to follow Jesus like Peter and Andrew, James and John did, with the good sense of moths to a flame: enjoy *some* light, but not too much. That way, nothing has to change.

But did you ever wonder .... Nah...we're Presbyterians, not mystics.

Still...have you ever wondered what it might be like to go all the Way? To throw caution to the wind and fly straight into the flame of Faith? To zoom straight into and through the phhht... of divine light to...whatever happens next?

Scary thought. Don't hear much about that in Reformed literature. But here's how popular Sufi mystic Jellaludin Rumi speaks of his experience,<sup>2</sup>

Traveling inside that light, so close, he says,  
my body turned to spirit.  
I saw nothing but light  
and the secret of revelation came clear. (#58, p. 103)

He goes on...Lovers, he says, (he's addressing lovers of God)

Lovers, Rumi says, you are dry tinder, (#81 p. 136)  
and it's time for the taste of fire. (#73, p. 125)

Fly straight into the candle, he advises,

this burning so dear no coolness  
can tempt us out of its flame. (#76, p.128)

But you know, Sufi mystics.... That's probably not what Jesus expects when he says, "Follow me." Or, is it?

To the glory of God. Amen.

---

<sup>2</sup> Rumi, Bridge to the Soul, Coleman Barks, (translations by A.J. Arberry and Nevit Ergin), HarperOne, New York, New York, 2007.