

"Stay in the Light, But Out of the Dark"
Ephesians 5:6-21

August 19, 2018

13th Sunday after Pentecost

Who among us has not been afraid of the dark at one time or another in their life? It is a common childhood fear. Some remain afraid of the dark to some degree even after childhood. Why? Some fear of the dark is unfounded. As you grow up, you learn that there is no "bogey man" in your closet and no monsters under your bed.

But, sometimes, fear of the dark is well founded. Darkness presents all kinds of danger. There is danger outside of ourselves -- a thief, a murderer, or a psychopath -- waiting in the darkness to do us physical harm. The potential assailant could even be a fierce animal -- a wolf, a grizzly bear, or a mountain lion -- waiting in the darkness to devour us. There is also danger within caused by darkness. If you are in darkness, you cannot see. There is the potential for running into something, tripping over a hidden object or falling down a steep ravine. Darkness can be very powerful and very dangerous.

Light and light alone has the power to overcome darkness. Light dispels the danger outside of ourselves which darkness brings. Those who hide in darkness in order to harm unsuspecting victims flee when light exposes them. Light also does away with the harm within caused by darkness. Instead of fear and unsureness which darkness causes because we cannot see, the light gives us peace and a sense of security because we can see everything clearly. That's why children who are afraid of the dark want a light - even if it's just a tiny night light - left on. They feel much more safe and secure because of the light.

If darkness carries with it such danger and fear, it would only make sense for people to remain in the light, not only because they need it to in order to be safe, but because they would want it in order to feel at peace. Why would anyone want to remain in the dark? Why would anyone want to leave the light?

Such questions help us understand the point our epistle reading for today is making about our lives as Christians. The Bible compares evil with darkness. There is, within this spiritual darkness, great danger outside of ourselves. There is someone lurking about, seeking to harm us. The devil is not a harmless mythical creation for Halloween, nor is the devil a metaphor for evil. The devil is a very real and very powerful individual whose sole intent and purpose for existence is to promote evil. He seeks especially to harm you as a child of God. He already has those who do not have a relationship with God through Jesus Christ in his hip pocket. It is your destruction which he desires. As St. Peter wrote, "Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour." (1 Pet. 5:8)

But there is also danger within from this spiritual darkness. Evil is not something that simply exists "out there". Evil exists within each of us. The Scripture does not say that you were merely in darkness (as if you could enlighten yourself or work your way out of the darkness), but that you were darkness. By being physically descended from Adam and Eve, you, in your spiritual nature, were absolute darkness. It's like being

blind. It doesn't matter how much light a blind person has, he will still be unable to see. No matter where a blind person goes or no matter how hard he tries to see, he will always be blind.

The Bible's description of us as being darkness means that we are not only in danger of evil, we are often blind to evil. It's so dark, we don't even know we are in the dark. Oh, sure, we know the sinfulness of really evil things: theft, murder, and so on. But Satan is clever. Paul writes of him in 2 Corinthians: "Satan himself masquerades as an angel of light." (2 Cor. 11:14) Satan disguises darkness as light and we buy it. For example, in our day and age, cheating (plagiarizing material from the internet) is considered to be an acceptable way of research by many students. Sexual behavior before and outside of marriage is deemed acceptable if the circumstances are right for those involved. Divorce is a valid and encouraged option for dealing with conflict. Acceptance of homosexuality is no longer seen as a sin, but as a mark of tolerance and sensitivity. A family is no longer seen as a man leaving his father and mother, being united with his wife, and the children who come from that union. A family is any group of people of any gender who want to live together.

This disguising of darkness even reaches into our common ordinary behavior. Paul writes prior to this text:

But among you there must not be even a hint of sexual immorality, or of any kind of impurity, or of greed, because these are improper for God's holy people. Nor should there be obscenity, foolish talk or coarse joking, which are out of place, but rather thanksgiving. For of this you can be sure: No immoral, impure or greedy person --such a man is an idolater --has any inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and of God. (Eph. 5:3-5)

Greed – isn't that the American dream? Obscenity – can we really stay that exists? Foolish talk and coarse joking - Isn't that just harmless stuff which we do with other people for fun? Not according to the Scripture. But that's how dark we are. We don't see or don't care about such sinful behavior. Yet, according to Paul, that darkness has consequences: exclusion from the kingdom of God and an eternity in the darkness of hell.

Only a very powerful light could destroy that darkness. Jesus is that light. During his ministry, Jesus said, "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life." Jesus came as divine light to this world of darkness to take on the darkness of evil, the darkness of sin, and the darkness of the devil himself. The battleground for this epic struggle was a lonely cross one dark Friday afternoon. Having lived a perfect life with bright and brilliant obedience to the will of God and having offered the perfect sacrifice for all deeds of darkness, Jesus' overcame the devil and the devil's kingdom of darkness crumbled in defeat.

The change in setting from a dark and dreary Friday afternoon when Jesus died to a bright and brilliant Sunday morning when Jesus rose from the dead indicated an even more profound change which had occurred. Spiritual darkness had been replaced by spiritual light.

Therefore, Paul says to us, "at one time you were darkness, but now you are light in the Lord." So, now, just as you were not just in darkness, but were darkness, you are now not only in light, but you are light by virtue of your connection to the Lord who is the light of the world. Just like physical light drives away predators that hide in darkness, so the light of the Lord drives away spiritual predators that depend upon spiritual darkness to destroy you. You are free from the devil's domination over you and protected from the devil's attempted destruction of you.

Just as physical light brings a sense of peace and security, so being the light of the Lord brings us a sense of peace and security as we live out our lives in a world that is still in the darkness generated by Satan. Think of being near a blazing fire in some distant isolated camp site. It may be totally dark around you, but, as long as you have that campfire there, you feel completely safe and at ease. In the same way, we have His light surrounding us and within us and that gives us peace and security despite the darkness around us.

This leads us to ask the same questions about this spiritual light which we asked about physical light. If spiritual darkness carries with it such danger and fear, it would only make sense for a person to remain in the light where there is safety and peace. Therefore, why would anyone want to leave the light and go back to the dark?

Paul exhorts us, "Walk as children of light." Stay in the light. Don't leave it. We are not to blend in with the darkness surrounding us, nor are we to associate with those who are in the darkness and attempting to draw us into the darkness. We are not to let that darkness blind us into indifference. Rather, Paul says, "Take no part in the unfruitful works of darkness, but instead expose them." The only way we can expose the darkness and not be swallowed up by the darkness is to live as children of light by remaining in the light.

Paul quotes what many think is an ancient Christian hymn in our text: "Awake, O sleeper, and arise from the dead, and Christ will shine on you." That says a lot about what early Christians considered the purpose of worship. After struggling for a week in which we are confronted with darkness and seduced by darkness, we gather here so that we can wake up, spiritually speaking, and have Christ shine His light on us once again.

We bask in the presence of His light here in His Word. We have our ties to His light renewed and strengthen as we eat His body and drink His blood in a "common union" called Holy Communion. We let that light shine through us to one another as we encourage one another by "addressing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody to the Lord with all your heart, giving thanks always and for everything to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ."

When we leave this sanctuary, this place of light, of refuge and of safety, we don't have to be plunged into darkness. We are able to take the light with us. The Bible is not so much a religious text book, but a spiritual flashlight. The Psalmist says, "Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light for my path." Use the Word of God to expose the darkness and keep you in the light because, as Paul says, "when anything is exposed by the light, it becomes visible". Be well equipped in the Word of God so

that you won't be overcome by Satan even when he masquerades as an angel of light or blinded by his darkness. Use the Word of God also as a source of comfort and peace when you feel the darkness surrounding you. Nothing can harm you or frighten you as long as that light burns brightly around you and in you.

Parents, you probably have told your children again and again, "Don't be afraid of the dark." And, when they are in the light, children aren't afraid of the dark. As they grow up and become more accustomed to the light, they no longer fear the darkness.

In the same way, I would encourage you not to be afraid of the blatant spiritual darkness which surrounds you or be blinded by the subtler spiritual darkness within you and which can so easily deceive you. When you are in the Light - connected to Jesus Christ - you are both safe from the darkness and secure in that Light. And, as you grow as children of the light and become more accustomed to the Light, may you never fear darkness again. Amen.