

OUT OF DARKNESS

Psalm 23

Ephesians 5:8-14

Have you ever wondered what it is be like to be blind? To never see the light of day, to experience a sunset or look into the eyes of your spouse, children, or grandchildren, to see the amazing beauty of a flower or the wings of a butterfly?

When I was a small child, I had a memorable experience of utter darkness. I was perhaps four years old, for I recall at the time that I was in the arms of my father. Our family had made a trip to Crystal Caves in central Ohio. I am sure I did not understand everything the guide was saying and at that age I likely wouldn't have comprehended it anyway. What I remember--and it is as vivid to me as if it occurred yesterday--is that we were in a large, almost amphitheater area when they turned out the lights--just to show us how dark it would be. I screamed in terror. Spelunking is not on my bucket list!

Light is so precious. The short days and long nights of December can lead to depression and restless waiting for the winter solstice which promises the return of greater sunlight and warmth. Is it any wonder the ancients worshipped the sun as their god? The mythologies surrounding the significance of light and the fear of darkness are deeply embedded in our unconscious.

And it is true. Without light, we would perish. Our crops wouldn't grow, there would be no photosynthesis, hence no oxygen to breathe--no life could exist. So why would God *not* be associated with light? Since no one has seen God directly, our descriptions are limited to the analogous. Light is perhaps as close as we can come.

The opposite is equally true. What we cannot see makes us afraid. Things that go bump in the night are unnerving. Our associations with death and the Void--absolute nothingness--are as terrifying as my experience in the cave.

Advent lends itself to reflection on dynamics of light and darkness. It is a time of preparation for the coming of Jesus and the interplay of forces associated

with good and evil, light and dark. For surely we have all experienced both in our lives. Who hasn't been the recipient of unexpected acts of compassion? Who hasn't had someone's arms open to them when they needed comfort and reassurance? Who hasn't had a stranger offer help in a time of crisis?

At the same time, who hasn't been threatened or injured by someone dark and foreboding whose intent was deeply malevolent? Who hasn't witnessed ugly bigotry and hatred for no other reason than someone's skin or nationality was different? We have within us an unlimited potential for good. Built into us is the drive toward love and compassion. The human spirit drives us toward caring for one another, toward a deep bonding that can lead even to the ultimate sacrifice. The life of Jesus is intended to be the example by which we live. It is God's incarnate self-expression.

But if we are honest with ourselves, we know the other side as well. We do our best to socialize it out of our children and most of the time we are relatively successful. Yet, within us there is still laying dormant an impulse to violence, to horde everything for ourselves, to shut our eyes to injustice, to elbow our way to the front of the line unwilling to wait our turn or to wantonly burn up precious resources well beyond our fair share just because we want to.

To deny the presence of evil in our world and the capacity for it in ourselves is dangerous. To underestimate the power of dark impulses in others can imperil our existence. As well, to dismiss our own ability to commit acts of destruction is just as perilous. If we do not remain conscious and alert, we can unwittingly lead ourselves into a state of shocked disbelief over what we did or failed to do in a given situation. I am reminded of an old Cherokee tale in which the grandfather explains to the grandson that within every person are two wolves fighting--one the wolf of anger, resentment and fear. The other of compassion, hope and love. The grandson asks the grandfather which wolf wins. And the grandfather replies, "The one you feed."

In Paul's letter to Ephesus, we see the congregation's internal drama played out. "For once you were darkness, but now in the Lord you are light." Isn't there is a huge difference between being in the light to actually *being* the light. To *be* light means that you are a spiritual being. It means that you were born of

love and that your true nature is one of love. Isn't this what the coming of Christ is all about...the Incarnation of love?

Paul's exhortation to the Ephesians is at the core of the Gospel. Accept your nature. The indwelling Spirit of Christ changes everything. "Sleeper, Awake! Rise from the dead." In other words, become conscious. No longer live in darkness and ignorance. Assume your role as a member of faith's community. Feed the wolf of compassion, hope and love.

Waking up, rising from deadness of soul, opening your eyes and seeing a part of life that was hidden in darkness can initially be a shocking experience. Because when we emerge into light, we confront what is dark in us. We see where we have missed opportunities, where our narcissism and senses of entitlement blind us to the bigger picture that has not ourselves in the center. As Paul says, "Everything exposed by the light becomes visible."

On the other hand, awaking into the light is mind bending! We awaken to infinite possibilities. In the words of author Margaret Stolz, "As divine expressions, our lives are important--every life, because we all are places where God stands forth in the world to bring light. Perhaps, because of the extra demands made upon us as citizens of the world, we may find ourselves at the point of taking our spiritual selves and our talents more seriously. We are not just crowds of people trying to get through life. We are unique, light-filled beings with an inherent purpose in life, and that is to bring the Divine to bear every chance we get, in large ways and in small."

The task before us is one of action. How else can we possibly give expression to our spiritual selves than through acts of compassion and love? Paul offers no specific suggestion. He simply says, "Try to find out what is pleasing to the Lord." The question to ask is if our actions affirm life.

So be the best you can be in whatever you do. If you're going to make a meal, prepare it lovingly. If you design software, press the limits of your creativity. Whatever you do with love contributes to the welfare of the entire species and advances civilization. For indeed, "the fruit of light is found in all that is good and right and true."

Advent offers us the opportunity to reflect upon things in life beyond paying our bills, Christmas shopping and the daily routines that occupy most of our attention. It prods us to look inside and make choices about who we want to be and how we shall invest in the world we share. Advent invites us to come out of darkness to be children of Light.

Reverend Thomas Dunlap December 1, 2024

Most gracious and loving God,

Your light fills us with hope, your compassion lifts our spirits, your steadfast care lets us taste of eternal life. For you are the brightness of morning that chases away the darkness of night; you are the warmth that brings joy to every moment; you are the colors of spring, the freshness of new life and the aroma of blossoming flowers.

We know that the world is not always a happy place. We are plagued by natural disasters, wars, disease, crime...and we know that any time, we can directly experience calamity and tragedy. And so we offer our prayers today for those who are struggling with grief, loss of home, hunger and uncertainty over their futures. We pray too for those who are in a position to offer direct assistance. May their hands and hearts work together to rebuild communities and bind our human family together in greater service and compassion.

And may all of our efforts to live as children of light bear fruit in large ways and small. May we awaken from our sleep and rise with the enthusiasm and will of a people who know we have been given the gift of Spirit and the flame of love that can never be extinguished. Accept our praise and thanksgiving in the name of Jesus Christ who taught us to pray together saying:

Let me hear the words of the Lord: Are they not words of peace, peace to his people and his loyal servants and to all who turn and trust in him?

Deliverance is near to those who worship him so that glory may dwell in our land.

Love and fidelity have come together; justice and peace join hands.

Fidelity springs up from earth and justice looks down from heaven.

The lord will add prosperity, and our land shall yield its harvest.

Justice shall go in front of him and the path before his feet shall be peace.

