“***While It Is Day***” by S. Finlan, at The First Church, Dec. 1, 2019

**1 John 1:5–6**

God is light, and in him there is no darkness at all. 6If we say that we have fellowship with him while we are walking in darkness, we lie and do not do what is true.

**John 9:4–5**

4“We must work the works of him who sent me while it is day; night is coming when no one can work. 5As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world.”

There are some very important points in our brief scriptures today. The first one is that there is no darkness in God. This is a challenge to philosophy, because we know there *is* darkness—that is, evil—in the world. But God stands in opposition to it. John is affirming the truth of God’s goodness, the fact that God guides us away from deeds of darkness to the doing of what is good, and that we can choose to either cooperate with or to resist God’s influence. If we would stand in the light and do good, we must turn to God. Goodness loves the light, but evil hides from the light, and evildoers lie about their deeds. In the Gospel of John, Jesus says “all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed. But those who do what is true come to the light” (3:20–21). This is a perennial principle, that goodness seeks the light, while evil seeks the darkness.

Now, religious philosophy has to try to understand the causes of evil, but it does not have to taint God with it. God is not the source of the evil choices that people make. God is the source of our freedom, but we are responsible for the choices we make. What about natural disasters and afflictions? Those are not our fault, of course. Religious philosophy has to account for danger and affliction in nature, yet it can still affirm the goodness of God if it looks at the *whole* of life, including *eternal* life, and at the beauty of spiritual progress over time.

Parts of the Old Testament had taught that God is the source of both good and evil, and the New Testament corrects that. John, in his first epistle (that is, *letter*), tells us that there is no darkness in God. The letter of James says something similar: “Every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change” in God (1:17). So God is not only good, but *consistently* good. Now we know that what humans say about God is often quite *inconsistent*, and that’s because what we *understand* about God changes constantly. God does not change, but our comprehension of God changes. Hasn’t your understanding of God changed, since when you were a child? And even as an adult, whenever you read a certain Bible text, then read it again a year later, and then two years later, you will get different understandings each time. That is not surprising, but it is important. *God* is not changing, although your understanding *is*.

So God is light. God is goodness. And God is consistent. I think we can dispense with the ancient idea that God is the source of evil events as well as good ones. Some of the prophets felt the need to preserve the notion of God’s transcendence and ability to impose discipline, so they said that God was the cause of everything that happened. But when we get a deeper understanding of God we can let go of the idea of divine threat, or divine rage or misdirection, or the idea that God would harden anyone’s heart. *Life* can harden hearts. An oppressive environment can harden people’s hearts. Mistreatment and corruption and disappointment and bad choices can harden people’s hearts, but God does not harden anyone’s heart. God does not will or cause everything that happens. God would help us avoid disasters; God shines the light that can help us find our way. Although suffering will come, God does not *send* suffering. It is *life* thatbrings hard times, but I don’t think God *wills* them. And it is fine to ask God to help us avoid mistakes and suffering. You can even pray “deliver us from evil” (Matt 6:13 RSV).

Now Jesus says that he must do God’s work “while it is day; night is coming when no one can work” (9:4). What does that mean? Probably that persecution is coming, and he will be killed, so he is doing good as long as he is able. The next line attests to his significance: “As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world” (v. 5). Jesus was able to say things like this, calmly, truthfully, and without ego. He could even say “he who has seen me has seen the Father” (John 14:9). When other people say things like that, they are egotistical and unbalanced. Jesus lived the Godly life, perfectly, and he still represents loyal and creative living, for all to see. He sheds light and truth, even onto other religions, which have borrowed from, or looked up to, Jesus. The Buddhist leader Thich Nhat Hanh affirms both the resurrection and the teaching on the Trinity in his book *Living Buddha, Living Christ.*

Jesus came to bestow truth and spirituality upon all of the human race. He revealed God for all humanity through his unparalleled loyalty to God, his healing power, his creative dialogues with and kindly ministry to individuals. He is a light to the Gentiles (Isa 42:6), a light to the human race, not just to those who defend certain Christian doctrines.

It’s not just his goodness that is revealing, but also his kindness to lepers and widows and short-statured tax-collectors from Jericho. To the woman suffering from hemorrhaging, who was bent over with shame, he says “take heart, daughter; your faith has saved you” (Matt 9:22, combining NRSV and CSB). Also revealing are his attempts to strengthen and prepare his apostles for the trials they would face when they were going to see him arrested and killed. And there is his forgiveness toward his killers (“Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing,” Luke 23:34), and his mercy toward a repentant thief (“Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise,” Luke 23:43). See his consideration for his mother and for an apostle when he said to them, from the cross, “Woman, here is your son,” and to John, “here is your mother” (John 19:26–27), ensuring that Mary would be taken care of.

In his final conversation with his apostles, Jesus told them that he goes to prepare a place for them in the afterlife (John 14:2). Jesus promises to take care of us, not to make our decisions for us; certainly not to make life easy or smooth; not to deliver us from all evil, although we are allowed to pray for that.

But he takes a loving parent’s interest in our progress, and he prepares the way for us. He is not only the light of this world, he is the light of the next world, as well. We are at the beginning of Advent season now, and this Sunday signifies hope. I hope to learn more, in the light of Jesus’ love and truth, in this life and the next. I hope that you are filled with hope, too, that it warms your heart today, inspires you tomorrow, and that it helps you to get a clearer focus on your life purpose. Maybe this is the advent of a new stage in your life, where you will energetically seek Jesus’ help in finding and fulfilling your life purpose.

Maybe you are seeking to be a peacemaker in your family or at your place of employment. Maybe you are seeking to strike the right balance in the way you react to one of your children, or to a relative. Maybe you are seeking to accomplish something special. May you draw hope from the love of God and the promises of Jesus. May you take light from Jesus and carry it with you throughout your life.