

Lent IV, March 26, 2017

Holy Spirit

“For once you were darkness, but now in the Lord you are light. Live as children of light.”  
(Ephesians 5:8)

From childhood, many of us are afraid of the dark. We may remember asking our mom or dad to leave the light on in the hall. Or perhaps have a nightlight that we relied on for comfort.

There is something primal about darkness-- representing the unknown and often leading to fear. We only have to walk into the basement of our own home and realize that the lightbulb is burned out to realize how even the familiar can become scary to us in the dark.

My oldest daughter Lauren and I learned about this several years ago. We went to an exhibit in downtown Atlanta. It was an interactive environment in which the participants got to experience—at least in a very limited way-- what it is like to be blind.

Did any of you attend that exhibit? When we arrived, we were given a white cane and had to put on blindfolds. Then we were led into a place in which we were unsure what we would encounter.

I remember we did have some prompts before each section—we were told we were entering a grocery store and were to find certain items on the shelves. How would we do that?

Next we were told we were about to cross a street. We could hear street sounds—car horns and traffic whizzing by. How would we get across? Though it was obviously only an interactive experience and not real life, our heart rates did jump up as we bumped into things.

I remember the last step of the exhibit was to order a Coke at a counter (I think Coca Cola was a sponsor). We had to get our money and give it to the counter person and then check to see if the change we received was correct. Though it was not much money, I remember feeling vulnerable and a little suspicious about the exchange.

At the end of the exhibit, we had a new, first hand, though very limited appreciation of the challenges and courage of people who are vision impaired.

I also understood why darkness and light are so often used in the New Testament to describe the primary-- and opposing-- ways of living.

Light and darkness are the images that the author of Ephesians used to describe what life was like for people before and after faith in Christ. He wrote that we were darkness—not just in darkness, but darkness; and now we are light, not just in light, but light. Something about our very essence is changed through our faith. We are able to see the world and help others to see it, too. We move from being heavy shades that cover the light of life to a bright lantern that brings light to others.

So how does this metaphor of light and darkness work in the real world? How can we understand it so we can explain it to others and live it out in our lives with God's help?

I received an insight in how it might work this past Thursday evening. I had written about half of my sermon that afternoon when I had to get ready for a training that was being done for some of our Community of Hope chaplains. A group of seven or eight of them are beginning to work with Forsyth County DFACS to provide chaplain ministry to their caseworkers.

As part of our training, the instructor had us to do a very similar exercise that I had just written about in my sermon-- what Lauren and I experienced at the darkness exhibit. We were to stand up, close our eyes, and then begin moving around the parish hall. We began to bump into the tables and chairs and each other. It was uncomfortable. Then the instructor told us to stop. She then tapped some of us on the shoulder and told those people to open their eyes. Then they were told to help those of us with our eyes still closed.

One by one you could hear gentle voices tell someone to move left or right. Someone actually took me gently by the arm and said quietly, "Would you like me to take you back to your seat?" When I said "Yes," he guided me back to where I had been sitting. I felt for my chair and sat down.

The exercise was designed to help us learn how to help others. The coincidence with the example I was using in my sermon got my attention. Darkness is a fear for most of us—and often we experience darkness due to having our eyes closed.

Later in the same training the other instructor began to tell stories about what she had learned about as a therapist working with children and families. Some of the stories were sad. Others were horrific. She warned us in advance they would be difficult. She said if we really want to work in this area, we need to know what we will be hearing.

You see, DFACS caseworkers cannot keep their eyes closed. They are the people our society has hired to deal with the things we prefer not to know about, but do want someone to deal with. Children who are abandoned or abused in some way. Parents who cannot make it due to economic stress or problems with mental health or addiction (or both). This is part of the

darkness of our world today. It is dark not only because some of the deeds are shameful, but also because so often many of us close our eyes to this reality.

What our chaplains will learn is how to be light in that darkness. One of the instructors even said it that plainly—your work is to be like a candle walking into the dark. The chaplains will encounter things as they listen to the caseworkers that will be hard. Their ministry is to listen, to pray, and to be present for people who are often under great stress due to the emotional and systemic demands of their work. What caseworkers do is important and what our chaplains will do to care for them as caregivers is important, too.

For those of us not called to be chaplains in this way, how can we be light in the darkness? For each one of us, God's call will be a little different. It is good to begin with the everyday and the close by in our lives before we take on the extraordinary and the difficult, like those working as DFACS caseworkers must face. So what could that be for you?

Perhaps you are called to be light for a neighbor, a co-worker, a friend, a church member, maybe your spouse or someone in your immediate family. They may be stuck in darkness in their life—their attitudes, their core beliefs, their actions may bring darkness to their lives and to this world. Whether from your listening heart, your words or deeds—perhaps simply from your presence—you can be light that exposes the darkness so they can see.

Jesus did that in our Gospel for today. He healed a man born blind, an extraordinary miracle, even for Jesus. His healing presence caused a controversy, though. Some people around him were darkness—more concerned with religious rules and the power it gave them than celebrating healing and new life. Some people were the enforcers of those rules; others were afraid of being punished by those enforcers, so they refused to stand up and be light in the darkness. Jesus stood alone as light for the person he healed.

In our world today, we are called by God to be light. That begins with knowing the source of our light—the love of God made known to us in Christ Jesus. We are to pray and give thanks as our way of plugging in to that light. Then we are to “Walk in love as Christ loved us and gave himself for us, an offering and sacrifice to God;” we hear these words most every Sunday. They are written just a few verses before our epistle reading for today.

Being light is not about being self-righteous or proud of ourselves or condemning and contemptuous of others. That would be artificial light. Instead, it is being so filled with God's light—God's truth and love-- that we cannot help but shine it in the world around us. Our deeds, attitude, and words can glow with God's love for the world. If God's light shines in and through us, we will expose darkness (in spite of ourselves sometimes). We all know what is “good, right, and true.” Darkness has to work overtime to try to cover it up.

As we continue our journey through Lent and approach Holy Week and the joy of Easter morning, let us live as children of light. The light of Christ begins by exposing darkness in our own hearts and homes; and then exposes darkness in the world around us. The light helps us to see others living as children of light so we can join together in exposing the works of darkness. That prospect of God's light dawning more and more is exciting and hopeful for us. I believe the weeks and months ahead will help us to see and live differently because of God's light-- God's truth and great love for us. Amen.