

“Loving Darkness”
A Sermon by Rev. Victoria ByRoade
The Fourth Sunday in Lent
Sunday, March 22, 2009
Scripture: Ephesians 2:1-10
John 3:14-20

PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION: *Lord Jesus Christ, who in love came to us, who in love embraced us, and who in love died for us, give us a strong dose of honesty and truthfulness about our true situation before you as we consider your Word to us this day, Amen.*

Our gospel reading this morning from John’s gospel is great news! It is news that we hear several times during the year as an assurance of pardon following our prayer of confession. “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son...God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him”, John proclaims.

Can there be any better news among us than that God loves the world – that God doesn’t want to condemn the world – that God desires to save the world? The light of God has dawned upon us in Jesus Christ.

One of the traditions which we here at First Church started a few years ago is to extinguish a candle on the Lenten Wreath each week. In my mind it is sort of the opposite of what we do during Advent when we light a candle on the Advent Wreath each week before Christmas.

The Advent Wreath is a way to visually prepare ourselves for the coming of Christ into our hearts and into our lives. The Lenten Wreath reminds us of the fact that while “the light came into the world, we loved darkness rather than light.” There, my friends, we have the sad, but, truthful tension that is at the heart of the good news/bad news that is Jesus Christ.

The season of Lent is that season of the

year when the church tries to do justice to both sides of that good news/bad news. God loves the world, yet, for its part, the world loves darkness rather than light. We can’t really see the light which dawns upon us until we are truthful about our love of the darkness.

We have to be honest about the whole story. Can matters between us and God be so bleak? Let’s keep ever before us the realization that the story of Jesus’ relationship with us ended, not with him being proclaimed the grandest teacher, best friend, and brilliant humanist in the world, but rather with Jesus being condemned as a common criminal who had earned the very worst of agonizing, humiliating deaths.

Now, I know that it isn’t comfortable or particularly popular to put matters between us and God in those terms. And, yet, today’s gospel lesson directly says that we love darkness rather than light. Though Jesus called us to live in the light, something deep within us hides from the clear light of the truth of the gospel and flees into the safe secrecy of the dark.

I’ll bet you wouldn’t be surprised to hear me say that I think there is an inborn, universal “fear of the dark”. Think about when you were a child – think about when you were raising your children – do you remember a time – or more likely – times – when leaving the room where the family was – the room which was flooded with light – was scary?! I remember being afraid of the dark. I remember my girls being afraid of the dark. And Chloi, at five, is afraid of the dark now. Why is that, do you think? Why are we afraid of the dark?

Well, if you ask me, our reading from John’s gospel this morning brilliantly illumines why. First, we KNOW what is good. We KNOW what is bad. Do you remember? Way back in the first book of the Bible – in the second Creation Story – the one concerned much more with relationships than chronology – God’s first

children KNEW when they had done wrong. After eating the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, they hid from God. And ever since then, we KNOW when what we are doing is not right, we hide it in the dark, we cover it under a blanket of darkness. Even children can be seen trotting out their homework with A’s and B’s and hiding the D’s and F’s in the bottoms of their backpacks.

But...John’s gospel doesn’t let our own personal determination of “good” and “evil” be the determining factor. Instead, the gospel writer offers a final litmus test: the things that we do that are “true,” and “good” and “beautiful” those things “have been done in God.”

You probably noticed that right in the middle of our gospel reading this morning were words which many of us have learned by heart – words which most of us feel comprise the perfect encapsulation of the good news of the Gospel. “For God so loved the world that he gave his only son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have everlasting life.”

It’s good news, for sure. In fact, it is the best news. But...it is not the only news. The news is not just that God loves the world. The news is not just that because of this love God gave his Son. The news also reports that “everyone who believes in him” will enter into a new relationship with God.

To demonstrate what this new, extraordinary relationship entails, John goes immediately back to the competing images of “darkness” and “light”. “Those who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may be exposed. But those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God.” A life lived according to the light, “in the light,” a life lived “in God,” is a life lived in relationship with God.

There is probably nobody who understands this moral truth quite so well as the

Las Vegas resident theologian of the tourism board – whoever that person is. The head “priest” of that agency came up with a perfect 21st century rendition of John’s words at the end of our Gospel reading. “What happens in Vegas, stays in Vegas” the slogan says. In the city which is known for going and flowing in the dark, “What happens in Vegas, stays in Vegas” is a slogan which pretends that what happens “in the dark” does not impact our “real” life.

But, just as we tell our children and grandchildren, everything that exists in the daylight is there in the dark, AND everything that happens in the dark is still present in the daylight. We cannot escape our knowledge of “good” and “evil”. We cannot pretend to be one thing in the daylight and another in the darkness.

You know, I can’t think of a greater condemnation to be levied against us that this: “They loved the darkness instead of light.” But that is what John says. Make no mistake. We all can be lumped together into one category – as sinners. There will always be darkness.

The story is told of a young man who entered a very strict monastic order. It was so strict that members were permitted to speak only two words each year to the abbot. At the end of year one, the young man appeared before the abbot and spoke his two words, “bad food.” At the end of the second year the young man appeared before the abbot and spoke two more words, “hard bed”. At the end of the third year, he came to the abbot and spoke his last two words, “I quit.” The abbot responded, “Well, it’s about time. All you have done since you got here is complain!”

We are people who love the darkness. We complain, we rebel, we work against the Kingdom of God. Death is all we know. Most of the time our lives are filled with the patterns of sin. And these, my friends, are the first things God sees as he looks down upon us.

Even so, though, God does this

astonishing thing. He brings the light anyway. He erects a cross of death that we might look up and live. He leads us out of the darkness. He loves the world and does not condemn it. He doesn’t condemn us, if we do not fear the light...if we will just believe. There ARE those who are evil and those who are good. The difference is this: there are those who do not want to be exposed and those who are willing to be exposed. There are those who hide their evil deeds and there are those who allow God in Christ to shine his light and expose those deeds. In a word, we all do evil deeds, but if we are truthful we are willing for deeds to be exposed.

I love the story which comes out of California. Police there were staging an intense search for a vehicle. They tried every measure possible, even to the point of putting announcements on the local radio stations to contact the thief. The reason for the intensity of the search lay on the front seat of the stolen car – a box of crackers which, unknown to the thief – had been laced with poison. The car owner had had created the poisonous crackers intending to use them as rat bait. Now the police and even the owner of the care where much more interested in apprehending the thief to save his live that to recover the car. And so it is, my friends, when we run from God. So often, we run from God to escape punishment, but what we are actually doing is eluding his rescue.

Brothers and sisters, “God didn’t send his son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him...Those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God.”

May it be so for you and for me.
Amen.

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