

St. John's Lutheran Church
February 13, 2008

"I Am the Light of the World"
John 8:12-20

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Dear students in preparation for the celebration of the affirmation of your baptisms, dear brothers and sisters in Christ, grace and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus, the Christ. Amen.

There was a time in my early years of life that I loved the darkness. I was a paper boy for the Minneapolis Morning Tribune in the late 1950's and early 1960's. That was back in the day when the Minneapolis Star was the evening paper and the Minneapolis Tribune was the morning paper. During a good portion of the year I got up to deliver the papers while it was still dark.

I delivered the papers on my bicycle – that would be my single-speed red Schwinn bicycle with the chrome fenders and the large triangular mud flap on the back fender. I had to ride my bicycle for a mile along US Highway 75, from my house, into the down-town district of Luverne, to where the Tribune truck dropped off the papers in the middle of the night, behind Jarvis Boyson's Auto Repair Shop. During a good portion of the year I rode in the morning in the dark.

I had a light on the front handlebars of my bike that shone brightly in the dark. And I didn't mind the darkness at all. I liked the quiet. I liked what I would call now, in my adulthood, the solitude of the darkness. I liked being the only one out of bed except for the residents of a few houses where there were lights starting to come on. There was something comforting about being out all alone in the darkness. To some degree, on those early mornings, I suppose I had a sense that the darkness was my friend.

It is not so in the Bible. There is no sense in the Bible that the darkness is the friend of humankind or, much less, the friend of God. The enmity between God and the darkness is proclaimed at the very beginning of the Bible in the second verse of the first chapter of Genesis. It is the account of creation in the Bible. And we read that in the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void, and it was darkness that covered the face of the deep.

And as God begins his creation, the first thing God has to do is chase away the darkness from the heavens and the earth. And so it is that even before God creates the sun and the moon and the stars, God shines a light into his creation. And the purpose of the light is to chase away the darkness. And then God goes on to begin the actual work of creation. Darkness is no friend of God. Darkness is no friend of the creation. Prior to beginning his work of creation, God chases away the darkness.

Darkness, furthermore, continues in the Bible as a metaphor for God's enemies. When there is injustice amongst the people, the Bible declares it to be darkness. Seeing injustice around him the prophet Isaiah declares, "Justice is far from us, and righteousness does not reach us; we wait for light, and lo! there is darkness; and for brightness, but we walk in gloom."

Again, the failure of leadership among the leaders of the nations of the world is perceived in the Bible to be darkness. In the book of Job, Job declares, "God strips understanding from the leaders of the earth, and makes them wander in a pathless waste. They grope in the dark without light; he makes them stagger like a drunkard." Darkness in the world are those forces and those dynamics which are opposed to God.

It is also true that in the Bible it is light that is the opposite of darkness. When the prophet Isaiah looks into the future to see the coming of the Servant of the Lord – the Servant of the Lord who, in part, is Jesus – the prophet declares, "I will give you as a light to the nations that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth."

So it is that there is deep meaning in the Gospel of John when John declares the birth of Jesus to be the birth of the light of all people. The verses that speak of the birth of Jesus as the birth of light are the verses from the beginning of the Gospel of John. These are the verses that we read at Christmas time during our candlelight service. We turn out the lights. And the candlelight spreads throughout the sanctuary. And we read, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the word was God. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it."

And then, later in John's Gospel, in our reading for this evening, Jesus confirms that he is the light that is come from God when he says, "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life."

Jesus is the light of the world. That is to say that Jesus was born, that Jesus worked his ministry of teaching and healing, that Jesus suffered, was crucified, was raised from the dead in order that God might, through Jesus, shine a light into the darkness of this world.

Jesus is the light of the world shining a light from God into the world to chase away the darkness of sin. Sin is that fatal flaw that lives within each and every one of us that strives to separate us from the presence of God in our lives. The consequence of sin is the darkness of eternal judgment. And it is that consequence of sin that Jesus has taken upon himself in his suffering and death, in order that all who believe in him might be forgiven of their sin and know the light of the promise of eternal salvation. Jesus is the light of the world that shines a light into the darkness of sin.

Jesus is the light of the world shining a light from God into the world to chase away the darkness of death. We have all known something of the darkness of death in our lives. For some of us we have seen that darkness only from afar. The deaths we have known have been the deaths of those who are somewhat distant from us or of those who have come to the end of a long and fruitful earthly life. And the darkness has not come, in those cases, to darken our lives to any significant degree.

But for others of us the darkness of death has been darker than this. Some of us have known the death of a dear mother or father or the death of our own spouse or one of our own children. In such cases the darkness of death is not mere gloom. The darkness of death, rather, is pitch darkness that comes to darken our lives more than we can even explain and sometimes more than we seemingly can bear.

One reason for Lent is to prepare ourselves for the celebration of the Resurrection of Our Lord at Easter. It was appropriate that on the first Easter morning it was as darkness gave way to the first morning's light that Jesus was discovered to be raised from the dead. It was appropriate that the light of Jesus' resurrection from the dead first shined just as the darkness of night was fading away. For in the resurrection of Jesus a light was shined into the darkness of death in the world. And all who believe in him now look forward also to the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting. Not only for our own selves but also for those loved ones in our lives who have already died in Christ. Jesus is the light of the world shining a light from God into the world to chase away the darkness of death.

And, finally, Jesus is the light of the world shining a light from God into the world to chase away the darkness of the devil. We surely know that the light of God is not all that we experience in this life. We also experience darkness in this life that we know is not possible to have come from God. We know of evil. And we know that evil has an independent source other than God.

Sometimes we experience the darkness of that evil inside our own selves. This is when we experience dark thoughts and feelings inside of ourselves that we wish were not there and that we have to fight against because of our dislike for them. And at other times we experience the darkness of that evil outside of our own selves. This is when the darkness of tragedy happens in the world that is so evil that it is difficult to comprehend. And we say that we have seen the darkness of the devil himself.

Peter writes in his first letter, "Like a roaring lion your adversary the devil prowls around, looking for someone to devour. Resist him, steadfast in your faith..." Our adversary the devil desires to devour us, to throw us into the darkness of this world in order that we might not know the light of God. It is against this darkness that Jesus has come. Jesus is the light of the world, shining a light from God into the world to chase away the darkness of the devil. "Be strong in the Lord," writes Paul to the Ephesians, "and in the strength of his power. Put on the whole armor of God, so that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil."

"I am the light of the world," says Jesus. "Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life." It is not necessary, dear friend in Christ that you should walk in darkness in your life. Jesus has shined a light into the world and into your life as well. You are a child of the light. Walk then, in his brightness and know the light of his love tonight, tomorrow and always. Amen.