

Third Sunday in Lent

March 19, 2017

Ephesians 5:8-14 (EHV) – ⁸For you were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Walk as children of light, ⁹for the fruit of the light consists in all goodness, righteousness, and truth. ¹⁰Try to learn what is pleasing to the Lord, ¹¹and do not participate in fruitless deeds of darkness. Instead, expose them. ¹²For it is shameful even to mention the things that are done by people in secret. ¹³But everything exposed by the light becomes visible, for it is light that makes things visible. ¹⁴Therefore it is said, “Awake, sleeper, rise from the dead, and Christ will shine on you.”

Introduction

A long time ago, but in our very own galaxy, rather than one far, far away, there lived a prophet named Mani. The religion he invented – Manichaeism – was dualistic. There was a good nature, characterized by light, and an evil nature, characterized by darkness. The realm of light lived in peace and harmony, while the realm of darkness lived in constant conflict with itself. You don't know how tempting it is to say those words in a Yoda-like voice. Manichaeism is basically first century Star Wars / New Age philosophy. The “Force” in Star Wars has light and dark sides to it.

Theme: Dear Christians, You Are Light!

The apostle Paul predated Mani by a couple hundred years and George Lucas by a couple thousand. He was in no way dualistic in his theology, but he did speak in similar terms – as did the apostles Peter and John, Jesus, and Isaiah to name a few other biblical characters. All three of today's lessons revolve around the contrasting ideas of light and darkness, and the opening verse of the epistle lesson is going to direct our meditation this morning: **DEAR CHRISTIANS, YOU ARE LIGHT! Not by birth; By rebirth; Walk as children of light.**

Part I: Not by Birth

Just as in Manichaeism, the Bible's use of the word “darkness” carries all negative connotations. Paul begins, **“You were once darkness.”** Paul had gotten into this subject back in the middle of chapter 4. Referring to the Gentiles, he wrote: **“They are darkened in their understanding and separated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them due to the hardening of their hearts.”**

Spiritual darkness refers to unbelief. So, Paul's telling the Ephesian Christians that they, too, used to be unbelievers – at one time, no different from their fellow citizens who continued to bow down before the altar in the great temple of the Greek goddess Artemis. Like the blind man in our Gospel Lesson, they were born spiritually blind. They had no innate concept of what life with God was like, but only a twisted view that they'd created for themselves. They had no clue how to be in communion with God, other than to follow the work-righteous leanings of their darkened hearts. They were so blinded that they'd convinced themselves that they could unite themselves with God by uniting themselves with temple prostitutes! They didn't see that they were stumbling obliviously toward eternal hell-fire because of their complete inability to be good enough along with their gross violation of God's law.

The mere *studying* of Greek and Roman mythology is sometimes enough to make one want to take a shower. But we've done far worse than just studied it. We've been there ourselves. **“You [and I] were once darkness.”** But *au contraire* a part of us says. **“I've never slept with a prostitute, much less a temple prostitute! I've never bowed down before a graven image! I've never offered a human sacrifice to appease God's anger! I've never joined in a drunk-fest and gotten up to 'indulge in pagan revelry!'”**

Do you remember what the Lord God saw both before and after the flood? From childhood – from conception, according to David’s psalm – **“every inclination of man’s heart is only evil all the time.”** It’s just as true of all of us as it was of the Gentile pagans that we were at one time enveloped by the pitch darkness of unbelief. The symptoms may have been different, but the same disease infected us all. We didn’t know what we needed to know about salvation. We were oblivious to our impending destruction. To be sure, we were darkness.

Transition

We aren’t light by birth, but we’ve been made light by rebirth.

Part II: By Rebirth

Paul doesn’t waste any time before he follows his law punch with a cool and refreshing taste of the gospel. **“You were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord.”** John likely wrote his Gospel well after Paul was taken into glory, but the theme is the same: **“In [the Word] was life, and that life was the light of men... The true light that gives light to every man was coming into the world.”** Notice that Paul doesn’t even say that they’re *in the light*, but that they **“are light.”**

Be clear on this – there’s no light outside of the Lord. And there’s no possibility of coming into the light outside of the Lord. John explicitly says that **“the true light... gives light.”** It’s not something that can be attained by oneself. In Colossians, we hear that **“he rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.”** Our involvement was purely passive. To use an illustration, just as a person doesn’t have anything to do with his first, physical, birth, neither does he have anything to do with his spiritual (re)birth. Or to use today’s Gospel Lesson as another example, the man born blind had nothing to do with his being able to see. We’re light by rebirth. We’re light by the working of Jesus through his gospel of forgiveness.

The verse doesn’t state it as a condition, but one is implied: namely, if you’re in the Lord, you’re light. The greatest thing, though, is that the condition is one that’s met by Jesus himself. Go ahead and go through a mental checklist: 1) Did Jesus die for my sins? Check! 2) Did Jesus see to it that I heard the gospel of forgiveness that comes through his life, death, and resurrection? Check! 3) Does Jesus send forth the Holy Spirit to work through the gospel? Check! 4) When I heard the gospel, whether in the Word alone or joined to the Sacrament of Baptism, did the Holy Spirit personally apply to me the forgiveness and righteousness of Jesus? Check!

Transition

By the purely undeserved love of God, you are who you are. In Christ, you’re light. So live like the people you are. Walk as children of light.

Part III: Walk as Children of Light

If you’ve ever watched one of the Disney *Buddies* movies, you might remember that one of the dogs is named Mud Bud. He’s called that because he loves to roll around in the dirt. In one of the movies, they’d accidentally been shipped to Alaska, and Mud Bud was discouraged because there was an insurmountable blanket of snow and ice between him and the ground. When they finally made it back to the state of Washington, the first thing he did was roll around in the mud and get himself all nice and dirty again.

That’s the *opposite* of what it means to be a Christian. Our Lord has graciously brought us into the light. Now Paul can invite us – yes, even command us – to live accordingly.

“Walk as children of light, for the fruit of the light consists in all goodness, righteousness, and truth. Try to learn what is pleasing to the Lord, and do not participate in fruitless deeds of darkness. Instead, expose them. For it is shameful even to mention the things that are done by people in secret. But everything exposed by the light becomes visible, for it is light that makes things visible. Therefore it is said, ‘Awake, sleeper, rise from the dead, and Christ will shine on you.’”

Living plants naturally produce leaves, and flowers, and fruit. Christians who are light naturally produce fruits, too – not in order to get to heaven, but because God’s given us heaven as his free gift. Paul talks about fruits of light in both a positive and negative way. On the positive side, there are the fruits of goodness, righteousness, and truth.

The fruit of goodness focuses especially on our behavior toward others. It’s showing love and compassion. It’s looking for opportunities to benefit others. It’s helping any person who has any kind of need. If we simply take the time to look around, we’ll be able to see a multitude of ways to show goodness toward others, both within and outside of our congregation.

Righteousness is directed more toward our behavior toward God and his Word. By his or her very nature, a Christian will strive to obey God’s commands out of love for him. Our new nature rejoices with the psalmist: **“Oh, how I love your law! I meditate on it all day long.”** As children of the light, we have wills and desires that are aligned alongside God’s will and desires. Knowing that Jesus has already made us righteous takes all the pressure off of us to be self-righteous. We simply act in accordance with who we already are.

Truth is a combination of our attitude toward God’s Word and toward others. We know that God’s **“Word is truth.”** We know that God wants us to **“speak the truth in love.”** That means standing up for things that may be unpopular in the ever-darkening world around us: things like the God of the Bible being the only true God and Savior or the Bible’s teachings on marriage and sexuality.

On the negative side are those things that we avoid. Children of the light naturally desire to avoid the **“fruitless deeds of darkness.”** We don’t want to fall back into the same things that controlled us before we were brought into the light. Rather, we expose those things as sin. What the world describes as an “alternate lifestyle,” we expose as immoral, wicked behavior. What the world defines as an “unwanted pregnancy,” we expose as murder. What society often claims as essential to earthly success, the Christian exposes as selfishness and greed.

Producing the natural fruits of goodness, righteousness, and truth and avoiding and exposing the deeds of darkness has another wonderful benefit. When we stand up for the truth and proclaim law and gospel clearly, the repentant sinner who was caught up in the deeds of darkness is led into the light. Christ shines on him and the light of God’s kingdom continues to expand.

Conclusion

Dear Christians, by God’s grace, you are now light! Enjoy the privilege of living in the light and being the light that leads others to Christ. Amen.