

Letting in the Light

Sermon by Joe Dutcher: March 11, 2018, at New Song Episcopal Church

The people were impatient and they started throwing shade about God and Moses. So God sent snakes. The people repent and ask Moses for help, Moses intercedes for the people. He makes a staff. Look at it and the snake problem is resolved.

Except for the staff this was a common theme. People were wicked and they suffered. They repented and were forgiven. It is a circle of turning away from God and turning back.

Lent is a time of fasting and repentance. Of turning back toward God. Like Advent, we are waiting and preparing. We get a little more somber, we give something up. We put away our celebratory words and sing songs in minor keys.

Today we have Jesus giving the message that God sent the Son of God, like the staff to be raised up, to give eternal life. Let your deeds be done in the light, Visible and without duplicity, for God. But the people, they loved the darkness.

We don't sit comfortably with condemnation here. If we are, as Jerry coined us, a church of odds and ends, then who are we to stand in judgement? For many, this has been a place of refuge from judgement outside these walls. But we know the judgement's in the Bible. It pops up a lot. Sometimes we put it in historical context or focus on other parts of the lesson. We are a New Song, not the church of Deuteronomy.

Today's lessons: God so loved the world. *Good.* Jesus didn't come to condemn the world. *Great!* Non-believers are condemned already. *Oh boy, here we go.*

Here we are, deep into Lent, deep in our time of repentance. Let's look closely: ". . . those who do not believe are condemned already, because they have not believed in the name of the only Son of God. And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil. For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed."

Do I believe enough? Am I condemned already? Oh man, I know that I certainly fall short. It is interesting that the emphasis is on action, not belief. But our actions are an extension of our inner dialogue.

Our thoughts and the actions we take, or that which were done to us, build pathways in our brain. The more repetition, the more paved and interconnected that path becomes. We all have a shadow side in our brains. Our brains are busily building paths of anxiety, regret, anger at others and at ourselves. We tread those paths until they are polished smooth, until we can slide down them from anywhere. I don't think of that as loving the darkness, so much as feeding it.

But I understand that we love it too. Sitting in judgement of others is a major feature of our entertainment. Think of how that pervades reality shows, sports, comedy. Some part of us likes to see people fail. In Ephesians, we are called "children of wrath". There is a reason that political satire often proclaims how an opponent was destroyed by some biting commentary. The Germans made a word for delight in others' suffering: Schadenfreude, and we bothered to learn it. My computer doesn't complain with red lines when I type it. The forms of this are pervasive: I occasionally eat at this Indian restaurant by the mall and they often have a Classical Indian version of American Idol on when I'm there. I don't know Hindi, but you can tell it is the same show, the same judgement, and one judge on the end who is happy to show his disdain.

Our heroes in media are more troubled and isolated too. I had to explain the idea of an anti-hero to my kids very early. One of the refreshing things about *The Black Panther*

was that it featured a hero that represented and was supported by a thriving community. Or look at the press about *The Wrinkle in Time* movie. "It is for kids, not for adults." Why? Because it is too hopeful and positive. It is missing the cynicism we adults are expecting. Negativity and anger is thriving. We walk away from the light in these trivial ways and heavier and scarier ways too.

I listened to the most recent Invisibilia podcast this week. A lot of the episode was about how people deal with loss. I made the mistake of listening to it at work. I had my headphones on, wiping away tears, trying not to make a scene. One observation they made was the way that people describe a traumatic event affected their ability to recover. The use of pronouns is important. "I" vs. "she/he/they". A researcher had people write about their loss. They found that the use of pronouns was the most predictive of an emotional recovery. The use of I correlated with less positive outcomes. So the way we tell the story impacts how we process it. How much do we make the story about ourselves? How well can we see the events from another perspective? Too much "I" and we just loop in circles, smoothing down that path in our brain. It reminded me of another podcast and conversation I listened to about depression, and how with depression the brain tells you a persistent lie. That you are worthless, of no value and unworthy of your life. The "I" is really strong in this narrative. The psychologist had some recommendations for providing a spark, to get out of that negative cycle. He had 10 positive steps, any one of which could help break the cycle. One of the ones that I found really interesting was to take a walk in the forest or on a beach. The psychologist thinks that the way these natural environments have two different biomes interacting gets us out of our narrative "I" spiral. We need to be outside ourselves to see, to break the cycle. Otherwise we stay trapped in the negativity.

So much negativity has been exposed lately. Clearly it is nothing new, but it sure feels like it is out in the open in some new ways. I am trying to see this as a hopeful sign. We have seen how people have responded with outrage and calls to action. People have shared their stories in ways that seem to be moving us to a better understanding of what oppression looks like in our daily lives. This week we are seeing how it is

becoming harder to hide the mechanism by which secrets are kept. Maybe some of these evil deeds will not survive in the light. That seems optimistic, but I have seen the effect at my workplace, so there is reason for hope. Not because there is some new HR policy, but because my friends are talking about themselves and the challenges they face as women differently.

Here is where I think the connection to our spiritual light comes in. Not from the rules handed down by some religious HR department, weighing and measuring the infractions in our soul. Shining a light on all my faults just sends me down the well-worn path of recrimination, self-judgement and guilt. Jesus didn't come to condemn, we do that ourselves. When we can change our own story, about how we think about ourselves and how we engage in the world. That is where the real light comes in.

We know we have all this brokenness. We see it all around us. And here we are in Lent, a place for this somber reflection and repentance. We bring ourselves here to lay up some of that burden, to sing, to recharge. But also to renew our faith that God can do something with us. Help us bring light out of our darkness.

Jesus's light calls to us, to draw us out of the paths we have worn down. To help us see how like the beach and the forest, our spiritual lives intersect with the mundane. To help us see the light in the world.