

“Light Out of Darkness”

**Pastor Dave Carlson
First Presbyterian Church
Sunday, February 19, 2012**

**Old Testament Lesson: Exodus 34:29-33
New Testament Lesson: 2 Corinthians 4:3-6**

“What has society morphed into, but a massive chaos, brainwashing teens to be this way or that to be accepted? Come on, look at the front cover!! It contains another boy band that puts out unoriginal music with uninspiring lyrics. They can simply do better than that! The worst of all is that they have those ‘got-to-have-it!’ sections which list outrageously priced, tacky items. The models in the magazine weigh, at the most, 105 pounds with perfect features. I can tell you that just looking at the magazine stabbed at my self-esteem.” (Well, not my self-esteem. This was written by a teenager asked to give an opinion about the girls’ magazine “All About You!”) She continues, “Am I supposed to weigh 105 and wear a size 6 to be ‘in with the style’? What kind of message is this magazine sending the teens of today???? That you have to weigh 105, wear GAP clothes and buy Donna Karan shoes to fit in and to be cool?”

Why can’t there be a magazine that inspires teenagers to be themselves and to be more than cogs in (the) machine, with individuality?! We (teenagers) have the potential to be deep, inquisitive and soulful, but this magazine promotes everything but that. It focuses on image.....

Wow! She had a lot to say about that magazine, didn’t she? It’s amazing how magazines like that and society in general take perfectly normal teenagers and project upon them such unhealthy and unattainable ideals –images that have no relationship to reality. It’s refreshing isn’t it to have a teen rip the blindfold off and stare reality right straight in the face.

The Apostle Paul, in today’s New Testament Lesson, does the same thing – he sheds light on a reality that others just don’t see. Paul is writing to the church in Corinth, a wealthy trading port at the center of Greco-Roman society. And he’s concerned that there’s too big a focus on buying the newest things and owning the best stuff and being up on the latest news, and that this is blinding people when it comes to the core message of Jesus Christ. “... If our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing’ writes Paul. In their case, the god of this world (again small “g”) has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God.”

In other words, Paul is trying to shine light onto the good news of Jesus Christ as fast he can, and people are blinded by all the noise and activity around them; they just don’t see anymore what’s truly important. We see the same thing today, don’t we? The complexity of our world makes it hard to know what to believe and how best to live our lives. Just look at the political controversy over contraceptives, abortion, and same-sex unions. Or the choices teens and their parents are forced to make between sports, a job, schoolwork, church, and a social life. Or the pressures and temptations they and we face to use drugs and alcohol, or have the best cell phone and the coolest or cutest clothes. Not to mention just generally looking cute or being cool. Now, I’m not saying that these things don’t matter. They do. But what I am saying – what Paul is saying – is that none of this matters if people aren’t learning to be more Christ-like in how they treat one another and in how they look at the world we live in. In LOGOS on Wednesday, the senior highs completed a Dave Ramsey series called Generation Change.

They looked at how they can be more Christ-like in their approach to money and materialism, and maybe help to transform society's relationship with wealth and giving.

Today is Transfiguration Sunday, the day we remember and celebrate Jesus on the mountaintop with Peter, James and John. It's where God reveals to them the true nature of Jesus Christ, who stands before them in dazzling-white clothes, the Son of God; or as Paul says, "the image of God." Paul has a simple, three-part formula for shedding light on the gospel so that people might see past false images and ideas to the glory of God all around us. "...We do not proclaim ourselves," says Paul, "we proclaim Jesus Christ as Lord and ourselves as your slaves for Jesus' sake." Part one of Paul's formula – it's not about us; we do not proclaim ourselves; part two – it is about Jesus; and part three – (it's about Jesus) so we give of ourselves for others for Jesus' sake; seek to serve their best interests of those around us. And the payoff for following this formula in your life? The light of Christ says Paul shining the world over, that's all. And to be part of that, all you've got to do is follow Paul's formula, and watch what happens.

Here's how Paul explains what happened to him and his friends: "... It is the God who said " 'Let light shine out of darkness' who has shone in our hearts, to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God, in the face of Jesus Christ." It's almost as if Paul was up on that mountain with Peter, James and John and saw for himself Jesus transfigured in the image of God. But Paul wasn't up on that mountaintop, so how was he able to maintain his vision of glory of Jesus Christ down in the trenches of society. Maybe because life was simpler back then; it was easier to focus on God; there weren't as many temptations, not as much pressure. It was just easier back then to feel the light shining in your heart and to know and experience God. You think? Well, if we look at the preceding chapter in Paul's letter to the Corinthians, we see that he shares a bit about his own struggle to let the good news of Jesus Christ come shining through. He says: "We have renounced the shameful things that one hides. We refuse to practice cunning or to falsify God's word." Turns out Paul faced the same temptations we face didn't he? – those shameful things we hide from our spouses, or our parents, or our teachers, friends, and colleagues. It's not as if Paul doesn't join us in thinking about how much easier it would be to just lie and cover stuff up – to give into those things we aren't proud of. Paul knew what it was to be sneaky and cunning rather than to stay focused on God. He knew temptations such as this and others, just as we do.

An applicant was being interviewed for a job. The employer held a glowing letter of reference, and complimented the applicant on such an impressive letter. With modesty, the applicant said: "I'm glad you like it. I wrote it my self." Well, that's one sure way of being shown in a good light, if you get away with it. But it does nothing to show God's true light, and in the end, we never really do get away with it. We all have things we've done that we're not proud of. We're all tempted to take the easy way out; follow the path of least resistance. We've all succumbed to temptation even though our heart was telling us it's not God's will. How do we find the strength to resist temptation; how do we develop the presence of mind to realize it when we're about to go wrong; where do we turn when there are no easy answers to life's toughest questions?

To shed light on this predicament to help us out, Paul points us to the gospel, to the good news of Jesus Christ. You know what that is, don't you – the good news of Jesus Christ? Yes, no, maybe? It can be kind of overwhelming and mysterious, can't it – who Jesus really is? Yet if you think about it for a moment, you know what the good news is that God came to us in Jesus Christ. That Jesus died for our sins. And that the risen Christ reigns as our Lord and Savior. It's not too hard to remember, and clearly worth remembering when faced with any of life's struggles. Here's one way to remember, each month the deacons of this church go two by two taking communion to those who can't get to church anymore.

And in the communion bulletin that they use, it says, “Let us proclaim the mystery of our faith. Christ is the mystery of our faith. Christ has died. Christ is risen. Christ will come again.” If you can remember that, then you can hold tight to the mystery of our faith and all its benefits. Through Jesus Christ, we gain the strength to resist any temptation, the presence of mind to choose the right path to follow, and the certainty of where to turn when the questions are tough and the answers aren’t easy. Jesus died for our sins, God raised him up as if those sins never happened, and Christ reigns as the Lord of our lives, sure to return to us in the fullness of time. Let that sink in a bit. Find ways to remind yourself of who Jesus is in your life, to deepen your relationship with Christ. It’s only when we lose touch with the grace of God that we get consumed by the shameful things we’ve done and tempted by all the worldly things around us. So how do we remain present to Jesus Christ and God’s incredible grace in our lives.?

“A few years ago, rumors spread that a certain Catholic woman was having visions of Jesus. The archbishop decided to check it out. ‘Is it true, m’am, that you have visions of Jesus?’ he asked ‘Yes,’ the woman replied. ‘Well, the next time you have a vision, I want you to ask Jesus to tell you the sins that I confessed in my last confession. Please call me if anything happens.’ Ten days later the woman (called him and) within the hour the archbishop arrived. ‘What did Jesus say?’ he asked. She took his hand and gazed deep into his eyes. ‘Bishop,’ she said, ‘these are Jesus’ exact words: ‘I CAN’T REMEMBER.’”¹

If we go through life with the certainty that Christ died for our sins, that God raised him up as if those sins didn’t exist, and that Christ is here for us, longing to be with us, there’s no temptation too big, no choice too uncertain, no question too complicated that we can’t find our way to God’s will. And now is our time to do just that.

Ash Wednesday is this week. It begins a period of 40 days (46 if you count Sunday’s, which we don’t) – 40 days of journeying along side Christ toward Easter. What a marvelous time to get clear about who Jesus is for us, to form a strong image of Jesus in our hearts and in our minds. And to help us do that, our Ash Wednesday service will be a little different this year.

Rather than a sermon, we’re going to have stations to visit where you can explore your relationship to Jesus in unique ways. One will help you discern what to give up – or take on – during Lent; at another, you’ll receive the ashes; and at others you can light a candle of forgiveness, burn away your sins, and listen for God’s voice through Lectio Divina (or the “divine reading” of scripture). But, to do any of this, you’ll have to come to the Christian Church; that’s where we’ll be this year, 7 p.m. on Wednesday, in a combined service of the Methodist, Christian and Presbyterian Churches.

And whether you make it to the Ash Wednesday service or not, this season of Lent is your opportunity to figure out how you can set aside that which tempts you or distracts you – those things, as Paul said, that we are ashamed of or struggle with in life. It’s a time of drawing closer to Jesus and gaining access to God’s will. If we embrace this opportunity, take it on in our lives at this time and moving forward, we will become more like Christ, and (like Christ) we will be able to shine the light into the lives of others. Amen

¹ Brennan Manning, *The Ragamuffin Gospel: Good News for the Bedraggled, Beat-Up and Burnt Out* (Portland, Ore.: Multnomah Press, 1990), 116-17.

PASTORAL PRAYER

Wondrous God, we long to be people who live and walk in the light of your glory. But sometimes we find ourselves shrouded in darkness – the darkness of fear, anger, temptation, and rebellious ways.

In our anguish and despair, we cannot always find you. Help us trust that you will lead us out of the shadows and back into your radiant presence. Fill us with your light so we are able to chase away the demons that taunt us in our darkest moments.

For though we are your servants, Lord, we come before you as broken and misguided people: People with our own agendas. People who want life to be good and easy. People who, if we see a need, too often we turn away.

We can't seem to care for ourselves, so how are we to help a world in disarray?

Show us, Lord, show us the light of your glory and lead us in how to respond to the needs of this world.

Turn us into your instruments in feeding the poor, sheltering the homeless, caring for the sick and dying, and comforting those who grieve.

And in all of this, Lord, shine in us so that our faces reflect your light and love to all those who don't yet know your saving grace. Let us forever tell of your glory, in all that we say and do. And let our testimony as followers of Christ begin today, with the very words that you taught us to pray together, saying:

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever.

Amen.