

“Drawn to the Light”

Pastor Dave Carlson
First Presbyterian Church
Sunday, March 25, 2012

Old Testament Lesson: Numbers 21:4-9

New Testament Lesson: John 3:14-21

Reading our Old Testament lesson about Moses and the serpent, one Bible commentator¹ observed that some of the people bitten by snakes “could have refused to look at the bronze serpent and died. It’s hard to imagine why anyone would,” he said, “but it was possible.” To which a reader² with a life-long terror of snakes responded, saying, “From my own nightmares, I can easily imagine being a Hebrew woman surrounded by venomous snakes slithering in sand, crawling upon rocks, hanging from tent flaps and ties, and hiding in pots and among tools.... I can see myself desperately swinging my head from side to side and whirling my skirts to dislodge any real or imaginary snakes ... – vainly trying to look at all places at once to identify and avoid the danger all around me. I cannot imagine having the courage to lift my eyes from the snakes around me to raise my gaze to a bronze ‘serpent,’ even as people who love me scream that it is my only chance to live. Fear, overwhelming terror, would immobilize me from doing the only thing that could save me.” The reader goes on to suggest that many people bitten – not by snakes but by sin – do not look up and live because of fear, overwhelming terror, at the nightmarish situations in which they find themselves. “They do not look up and live,” says the reader, “because they have no practice trusting anything but their own abilities.” “They do not look up and live because they have invested little time or effort in those who love them. They do not look up and live because they have no long-term relationship with God that allows them to trust even when not to do so is death.”... an inability to trust in God even when not to do so is death.

In our New Testament Lesson from John, Jesus describes such an inability to trust in what can actually save us when he says, “... 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..... (But), those who do what is true come to the light. Jesus is describing two kinds of people here: those who do evil deeds and love the darkness, and those who do what is true and are drawn to the light. Now, how many of you know someone who is pure evil? Not many; at least I hope not. No, most people we know are

¹ Bob Kaylor, Senior Minister of the Park City United Methodist Church in Park City, Utah.

² Deborah J. Stowers, in e-mail correspondence.

basically pretty decent people – people drawn to the light. And if “evil,” misguided forces show up in our day-to-day lives, it’s usually not because of pure evil, but rather the result of decent people being a little misguided in their opinions or actions or hopes and dreams. They are still drawn to the light, but somehow they never seem to quite reach the fullness of its warmth and brightness. And, of course, when Jesus says “those who do what is true come to the light,” he means they are drawn to God.

Do any of you know someone who is drawn to God, but somehow this person never quite makes it? You can tell they would really love to be doing more to help people less fortunate in the world, but things get in the way. They have a goal in life that eludes them and instead of having faith, they’re set with despair. They talk about coming to church, but never quite make it; or if they do give church a try – and by church I mean worship and Sunday school, or LOGOS, or circle, or fellowship events, or whatever – if they do give it a try, it doesn’t seem stick – they have no vision for how God might work in their life through a community of faith. Can you think of someone like that? Has that someone ever been you? Have you ever felt drawn to God, certain there’s something more to life, but somehow you were, or are now, unable to attain it, unable to reach and enjoy the fullness of life that God is calling you to? What gets in our way?Maybe it’s some of the stuff on your Activities & Places worksheet from last week’s sermon, for those who spent a little time with it (there are more worksheets in the Parlour if you need one.) It’s a good way for us to discover what’s getting in our way.

Michael R. Nichols³ tells the story of driving home to see his mother and passing on the highway a great big church with a lighted sign out front – you know the place where they put up those silly slogans and sayings to draw people in. The motto that week, says Nichols, was, “If you’re done with sin, come on in.” So Nichols went a little closer only to find that someone had added to the sign, writing with lipstick, “But if you’re not quite through, call 272-0200.” Sometimes we do get drawn in the wrong direction, don’t we? I mean, haven’t we all had a time when we felt drawn to move closer to God only to have something draw us in another direction? We want our life to be more in line with our faith, but it isn’t. What’s missing? What’s missing for you or others who are drawn to a deeper sense of God in their lives, but somehow just can’t get there?

Well, according to our scripture lesson today, it has more to do with avoiding “the darkness” and instead concentrating on the light of God than it does with worrying about any evil or misguided forces we may

³ “Finding Your Own Lake Wobegon: The Healing Power of Humor,” *Hometown Humor, USA*, ed. Loyal Jones and Billy Edd Wheeler (Little Rock, Ark.: August House Publishers, 1991), 209-10.

come up against. In other words, when faced with a little darkness, return to the light, point to the light. Pure evil, as I said, is a very rare thing in our day-to-day lives. Most often, people who do not feel the light of God in their lives just have something blocking it. It's not that they are evil or drawn to darkness; they just can't seem to see the light. Or, glimpsing the light of God, they can't manage to follow it.

Marsha Bishop, in the book "Bread Afresh, Wine Anew,"⁴ tells about when her children were still in preschool and she had a delivery route driving for Meals on Wheels, primarily for a housing project in Dallas. One day the sitter didn't show so she had to take her children with her. She scooped up some old magazines to give out along with the food, and off they went. "There was one older woman on the route," says Bishop, "... who was a real pain in the neck. She had broken her hip and the experience had apparently soured her toward everything and everyone. If there was nothing to complain about, she'd bark out, 'Just put the meal in the refrigerator, I'll get to it later.' Bishop tried talking with her once or twice, but the woman was so rude....As they arrived, Bishop's 5-year-old "picked up a couple of magazines and said, 'I'll bet she will really like a magazine.' Fat chance, thought (Bishop)." On the way to the door, her 2½-year-old stopped to pick a couple of dandelions. "I knocked on the door," says Bishop, and from inside, a "cranky voice said, 'You're late today. Come on in, it's unlocked.'" Bishop opened the door and the boys pushed past her and ran to the woman. "We brought you some neat magazines" said the 5-year-old. "I brought something too," chirped his brother, who practically fell into the woman's lap with his two wilted dandelions." As her little ones romped back down the stairs, Bishop apologized for their rambunctious behavior. "Bye-bye," waved the youngest boy. Bishop glanced back at the woman. She had "pulled herself up and was clutching the two dandelions in the hand that held onto her walker and waving with the other. The bitter expression on her face had melted into a smile, (a smile) that brightened the tears rolling down her cheeks."

Maybe it's not as hard as we think to share the light of Christ with another human being – even someone we are just certain is too busy enjoying the darkness to even notice. Jesus says "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." What purpose, other than to let the light of God shine into the life of another human being, what other purpose could there be for your life?

⁴ "Blinded by a Log," in *Bread Afresh, Wine Anew: Sermons by Disciples Women*, ed. Joan Campbell and David Polk, (St. Louis, Mo: Chalice Press, 1991), 122.

Marsha Bishop could have let herself be drawn into the darkness of the babysitter not showing up/and blown off her delivery route for the day. But instead she scooped up her boys and stepped into the light of God's plan for her, a light that so easily shined into the life of an otherwise lonely and sometimes cranky person. What other purpose could there be for your life - for my life - than to shine the light of into the life another human being?

I'm going to stop there for today. Next week we have our youth – our little 2½-year-olds and 5-year-olds and older-year-olds – bringing us the Palm Sunday message in their spring musical, shining the light of Easter into our lives. And then on Easter, we will begin a three-part sermon series that will look at what keeps us from shining the light of Christ into the lives of others, where we can turn for inspiration, and a truly amazing goal to help us keep on course in life. But for now, let us realize that we have been put in this place at this time for a purpose, a divine purpose that has a lot more to do with the light of Jesus Christ than with any darkness we or others may experience or express in life. If we concentrate on the light, trust that others are drawn to God – even when we can't see it in them – and seek to let our words and actions reflect this, reflect our faith in them and in God, if we do that, then we will be that much closer to discovering our true purpose and helping others to discover there's. That's what we're here for, to reflect God's glory and light in our lives, and in the lives of others. Amen.

PASTORAL PRAYER

It is hard to be in the middle of anything, O God, and here we are, near the middle of Lent. We can begin well with enthusiasm and commitment, and we can end well with joy and celebration. But we need your presence to make the middle meaningful. Heal what we have been and listen in these moments of stillness to what we want to become; to our prayers for ourselves and for others lifted up now in silence. (silent prayer)

We pray, Lord. We pray that you would recreate us and renew us as we journey through Lent. We pray that we might come to know this mystery of our faith: that we are loved far more than we deserve. Help us to claim this truth as our own. Awaken us to the reality that you loved us enough to give us your beloved son. In thanksgiving for this gift of love, inspire us to so love others through Jesus, the Christ, who taught us to pray, 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.

