Good Shepherd Lutheran Church Watertown, WI

Sixth Sunday of Easter May 5, 2013

"Praise the One Who Breaks the Darkness"
Rev. David K. Groth

"And the city has no need of sun or moon to shine on it, for the glory of God gives it light, and its lamp is the Lamb. By its light will the nations walk . . . and there will be no night there" (Rev. 21:23-25).

Collect of the Day

O God, the giver of all that is good, by Your holy inspiration grant that we may think those things that are right and by Your merciful guiding accomplish them; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen

My son Jonathan was confirmed on Palm Sunday. For his confirmation gift, Gail and I purchased a little terra cotta oil lamp. When the Bible talks about lamps (e.g. "Thy Word is a lamp unto my feet"), something like this is what it means. This one is old. It's from about a hundred years after Christ, and it's from Israel. Ancient oil lamps are not terribly rare. In fact, they are one of the more common artifacts found on archaeological digs. Therefore, they are not as expensive as you might think. This one cost us about \$50, and again, it's nearly 1900 years old. Simple farm tools from a 100 years ago can cost much more. We bought this lamp from a reputable dealer of antiquities in New York City. And it's a nice confirmation gift because you can write a little note about how God's Word will continue to be a lamp for your feet as you go through the various chapters of life.

Jonathan liked the gift, but it was dirty. Clearly it had been buried for a long time. The nozzle was clogged with hardened soil, as was the chamber that houses the oil.

Jon decided he was going to clean it up with water and a soft tooth brush. I was a little concerned about the plan, but he knew the risks and the lamp belonged to him. He took it to the upstairs bathroom and about twenty minutes later brought it back down again. Cleaning it up had actually brought out all sorts of details that were not visible before, the most striking of which is a little cross right in front of the nozzle, right next to where the flame would be. "I am the light of the world" Jesus once said. What a powerful witness left behind for us by someone who lived 18 or 19 hundred years ago. It's a reminder of the darkness of the cross, and of how far God was willing to go so that we could walk in the light. It's also a reminder that you never know what your Christian witness will mean to someone, nor when.

I did a little research and found that Jewish people in the second century, after the temple was destroyed by the Romans in 70 AD, started stamping menorahs onto their terra cotta lamps as a reminder of the temple. At the same time, Christians started putting crosses near the nozzles, a reminder that Christ is our light in the darkness. Some of these same lamps have on the side of them in Greek: "May the Light of Christ shine well for you." On the side of Jon's lamp there aren't any words, but there is what appears to be a vine with berries on it. Again, Jesus said, "I am the vine. You are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me, you can do nothing."

After scrubbing up this lamp, Jon started thinking, "I wonder if it would still work." Again, I wasn't so keen on the idea. Jon and I don't have a particularly good record with matches and experiments. But again, it was his lamp, and I have to admit, I was intrigued too. Knowing they usually used olive oil back then, we filled up the little chamber with olive oil. It holds less than a tablespoon. We took an old candle and cut the wick away from it and inserted it into the nozzle. And then, hoping it would not blow up, Jon lit a match and held it to the wick, the wick that is right next to a little cross, a long dormant witness. And . . . the Light of Christ. We are so proud of our LED's that will work for twenty five years. This light still works 1900 hundred years later!

In our text, St. John continues with his description of the vision God gave him of heaven. He says "I saw no temple there, for its temple is the Lord God the Almighty." We know God gave his people the tabernacle, and then later, the temple, and promised to be there for his people. It's where he covered over his glory and worked through his Word and the sacrifices that were made for the forgiveness of their sins. But in John's vision of heaven, he sees no temple, because the temple is no longer necessary. Now the people stand

before God face to face. He doesn't need to cover over his glory anymore, nor do they need forgiveness anymore. If as sinners we stood before God and looked at his glory we would surely die. No one can see God and live. But those who are in heaven are no longer stained by sin. "They have washed their robes" John says in chapter 7, "and made them white in the blood of the Lamb."

John continues saying there's "no need of sun or moon to shine on it, for the glory of God gives it light, and its lamp is the Lamb." Today we have so many different kinds of lights: incandescent, compact fluorescent, halogen, and the LEDs. In the ancient world, there were really only two sources of light: sun and fire. In heaven, all that is swept aside. In chapter 22 he says: "They will need no light of lamp or sun, for the Lord God will be their light."

Light and darkness. The Bible uses both terms not only in a physical sense, but also metaphorically or symbolically. Of course God is the Source of light. It's the first thing God created. "Let there be light he said." What a good thing it is. Without light, life would not be possible. Nothing would grow. And when you're trying to do a project in poor light, if you're like me, it's enough to make you crabby, until you take the time to set up a task light. Light is good. God was the first to say that (Gen. 1:4).

Since life depends on light, and light is good, the Bible therefore refers to God as light. Ps. 27, "The Lord is my light and my salvation" (v. 1). Ps. 104, "You (LORD) are clothed with light as with a garment." Paul also says, the Lord "dwells in unapproachable light" (1 Tim.6:16). And John writes, "God is light and in him there is no darkness at all" (1 Jn 1:5).

One time Jesus stood up and declared, "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness" (Jn 8:12). The Pharisees hated every word of it, because they knew he was claiming to be God. It's one of things that got him crucified.

So in the Bible, God is the source of light, and God dwells in light. But not just God, also his Word is a light. In Proverbs 6, the one who is teaching God's commandments is described as bringing light to the darkness and showing us the good way to go. In the New Testament, this light of God is no longer just for the Jews but also for the Gentiles. Matthew 4:16, "The people dwelling in darkness have seen a great light." Psalm 119 says, "Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path." Don't think of a powerful searchlight that lights up your path for the next hundred yards. Instead, think about this little lamp. It's not a very impressive light, is it? It's not going to wow anyone. But when you're submerged in darkness, this little flame will not light up the whole path. But it will be enough for your next step or two.

God is light. His Word is light. And then, surprisingly, Christians too are lights in the world. Ephesians 5:8, "At one time you were darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Walk as children of light." 1 Peter 2 says God "called you out of darkness into his marvelous light" (v.9). Jesus first said, "I am the light of the world." Then he turns it on us. "You are the light of the world" he says. "A city set on a hill cannot be hidden. Nor do people light a lamp and put it under a basket" (Mt. 5:14-16). That would be foolish. Yet we do it all the time, don't we, especially at work but also just when we're out and about. We hide or suppress our light of faith because we think it's appropriately humble, or the proper separation of the church from the world. But according to Jesus that's just ridiculous and nonsensical. It's like lighting up a lamp only to put it under a basket. No, this little lamp is most helpful, and casts the most light when it is put up high on a stand. The higher the lamp, the better the light. Therefore these lamps were often put on a projection from the wall. The point is, don't be embarrassed or apologetic about your light. Rather, hold it up high so it, quote, "gives light to all." Paul says it's important for us, "in the midst of a crooked and twisted generation" to "shine as lights in the world, holding fast to the word" (Php 2:15). And when your faith seems weak, there's that promise of Isaiah. "A bruised reed he will not break. And a smoldering wick he will never snuff out" (Is. 42:3).

Of course, light also means holiness and purity. In Romans, Paul writes, "Let us cast off the works of darkness and put on the armor of light. Let us walk properly as in the daytime" (13:12).

If the light means faith and obedience, then darkness means unbelief and wickedness. From John 3: "the light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light because their works were evil" (v. 19).

Darkness also means the powers of evil. Paul writes, "Our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against . . . the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil" (Eph. 6:12). Darkness also means spiritual ignorance. Isaiah speaks of those who "dwell in the land of deep darkness" (9:2). Those who dwell in the land of deep darkness, they are not as far from 1611 E. Main St. as you might think. They could use some light.

Finally, deep darkness refers to the despair and misery of the lost in hell who are thrown into the "outer darkness" where there "will be weeping and gnashing of teeth" (Mt. 8:12; 22:13; 25:30). But that's why Jesus has come. In John chapter 12 he says, "I have come into the world as light, so that whoever believes in me may not remain in darkness" (v. 46).

Which brings us, thankfully, all the way back to our text, to John's vision of heaven, a place of light, a place where there is no night, and a place that doesn't need the sun or moon to shine on it, for the Lamb is its lamp. That's where you belong, for as Paul told the church in Thessalonica, by grace, "you are children of light, children of the day." (1 Thess. 5:5). So also with you: through Word and sacrament the Lord has turned your darkness into light (2 Sam. 22:29). David said it for each of us: "You, Lord, are my lamp" (2 Sam. 22:29). Amen.

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