

Sermon December 31, 2023

Christmas I, Year B; Isaiah 61:10-62:3; Galatians 3:23-35, 4:4-7; John 1:1-18

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The Bright Side

At lunch time on most Saturdays, Julian and I take a break from our respective tasks and sit down with our sandwiches and watch an episode or two from the old TV series, *Tales from the Dark Side*. I have often remarked to him that some day I wanted to find a way to use the show's opening lines in a sermon, and I thought I knew which scripture it fit best: that wonderfully mysterious passage from 1 Corinthians 13 which says "For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face." But after sitting with the beginning of John's Gospel this week, I may have changed my mind.

The show's opening lines, voiced by Paul Sparer in a gravelly baritone I wish I could reproduce, are "Man lives in the sunlit world of what he believes to be reality. But...there is, unseen by most, an underworld, a place that is just as real, but not as brightly lit...a Dark Side." And his words were accompanied by an otherworldly sound track of seemingly disjointed notes, whose sole purpose was to put you on edge even before the show began.

That short, skin-prickling narrative and the repetitive, 8-note theme song underneath set the tone for the drama about to unfold – a drama often hinging on unexplainable events, or occasionally about evil sneaking into our world – but most often the writers chose something much more pedestrian, and perhaps even more unsettling: telling tales of what happens to everyday characters like us who go bad: the gruesome and drastic consequences of choosing greed over compassion, revenge over forgiveness, evil over good. In these stories, people get what they deserve, and punishment comes swiftly and relentlessly from the otherworldly hand of the dark side. Through their words, the show's writers have spoken into being a world in which the power of dark retribution is eternally and inescapably present.

And there is something satisfying about watching the bad characters get their comeuppance. They deserved it, after all. And who hasn't, at some point in life, wished something nasty would happen to those who really get on our nerves? It takes a good deal of maturity and restraint not to wish destruction upon our enemies, especially those who are responsible for so much misery in the world. It's no wonder this short-lived series has continued to be a quiet cult classic 40 years after it first aired.

But I think, had the writers continued the episodes far into the future, they would have encountered a fundamental and fatal flaw in the premise of the series. In this made-up dark side world, eventually there will be no one left. Because everyone, at one time or another, chooses badly – perhaps even horribly – and in these half-hour episodes there are no second chances, no forgiveness, no redemption. You're good until you're not, and then it's curtains. And so, for everyone who has the misfortune of being the main character, it's only a matter of time before the consequences of your actions take you out. From the beginning, the writers' words spoke darkness, and in this darkness lay inevitable destruction.

Merry Christmas.

The Good News is that this is *not* the world we live in. In spite of everything we see caused by humans doing bad – the horrors of war, the agony of starvation, of hatred, torture and abuse, or the grief of burying a murdered child – the world of darkness is not the world we live in. In spite of everything I have managed to mess up in my life or how I have hurt others, I cannot make this world succumb to the darkness. Nothing anyone did, or does, or will do, can make our world into the world of the dark side.

Because in our world, we have something that doesn't exist in the imaginary one – an Author whose Word spoke *light* into our darkness from the beginning of time, and shattered its power over us. John, echoing the first words of Genesis, says "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being.

What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.”

But often the world does look very dark. There is sorrow, and hatred and badness of every kind. Often the world does take on the appearance of an episode from Tales from the Dark Side. Do I have the courage to be out in the world, proving that the light does indeed shine in the darkness, and that in spite of appearances to the contrary, that the darkness did not, has not, and will not overcome it?

Before I was ordained, I promised myself I would never preach anything I did not believe. And I have kept that promise. One test of this promise is to take my words out of the pulpit, and see if they hold water somewhere else. If my words don't hold up out there, then they have no place being preached in here.

And so, in my mind's eye, I take myself to Gaza. As I see a mother frantically comb through the rubble looking for her daughter, would I be able to say to her that the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it? Would those words even be appropriate at a time like that? I think not. But Light doesn't need words to make its presence known. In such a case, in my imagination, I would keep my mouth shut, and instead start digging through the rubble with her. When we both could do no more, I would hold her in her grief, if she would allow it. If I had water, I would share it. Sometimes it is more important simply to be the light, rather than talk about it.

Here at Christ Church, I think we do both – talking about the light and being the light – very well. There is a group of women who meet on Thursday afternoons at Lyn Slater's home. They listen to each other's stories, pick up on who might be in need of what, and before leaving, they pray. For themselves, for their families and friends, and for us. Every week. There's also a lot of praying going on in the various book groups, and I hear that the men's groups are in on the action, too. All lights shining in the darkness.

We have a Letterbox ministry who writes notes to those in the parish who are in pain, and we have a prayer ministry team. We provide food and clothing to All People's church, and we have a team who makes meals for those in this parish who need occasional extra help. This is by no means all that our Christ Church community does. We are overcoming darkness one act at a time, over and over.

And we are just one small gathering of sparks throughout the world. In every community throughout the world there are those who bring light where others might see only darkness. Those who bring water and food and hugs and hope, and a shoulder to cry on when there is nothing more that can be done. And yes, when the time is right, those who do indeed use words to tell about the saving power of God in Jesus Christ.

Because of the Word made flesh who came and lived among us, there are people all over the world whose words and actions have given us a very different set of stories to tell from the ones playing on the television series I began with. In their stories, in place of darkness, there is light. In place of greed, generosity. In place of damnation, forgiveness; and in place of sorrow, joy.

Were these stories to be made into half-hour segments, I imagine the introduction to this series would go something like this, and be narrated in a voice filled with richness and hope, rather than gravel:

“We live in the sunlit world of what we know to be reality. But...there is, unseen by many, another world, a place that is just as real, and even more brightly lit...a Light Side.” And the music accompanying it would be a glorious, heart-stirring sound track of exquisite harmony, whose sole purpose would be to place you on the edge of your seat, waiting to see what wondrous thing God would be doing next.

And that, indeed, *is* a Merry Christmas.