

Rev. Danny Mackey
Third Sunday in Lent – Oculi
March 12, 2023
Ephesians 5:1–9
Grace Evangelical Lutheran Church in Muncie, Ind.

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and from the Lord Jesus Christ.

For you were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord.

Darkness can be terrifying. When you're in the dark, you don't know what's happening around you. And for our children, the imagination can start to take over. In the darkness, as they lay in their little beds, they hear noises coming from in the closet, from under the bed. The smacking of lips can be heard as monsters under the bed begin to drool over the idea of a tasty kiddy-sized meal. So children scream, and mommies and daddies come running to see what's the matter. As a result, every night, the closet needs to be checked and the bed looked under to make sure no boogeymen are to be found. And, just in case, night lights are turned on to keep the darkness at bay.

When we're in darkness, we become blind, unable to see. We grope and stumble. In the darkness, we're helpless, lost, confused. But, as we get older, we become convinced that darkness is okay. We grow out of our fear, grow up and learn, not only how to cope with it, but how to use the darkness to our advantage. As children, we quickly discover that it's much easier to get away with hitting your brother if Mom and Dad don't see it. Or, even better, you can definitely get away with it if no one sees. Darkness becomes our ally—it covers our wrongs, makes secret our sins.

Darkness truly covers, conceals, prevents light from exposing. Darkness isn't just a physical reality, but something fomented by the devil, the world, and our sinful flesh. The fruitless deeds of darkness are the opposite of the fruits of light. They are not goodness, righteousness, and truth; rather, they are evil, self-righteousness, and deceit. These fruitless deeds stir up darkness, allowing it to spread, allowing it to make people blind to sin, to their need of a Savior, to God.

What easier way to get rid of condemnation of a sin than to make it permissible? I'm sure the crime rate would go down in this country if we made fewer things a crime. In Delaware County, if we legalized assault and robbery, our crime would drop, wouldn't it? California's sort of done that by not prosecuting those crimes, but people are still getting hurt. In fact, not prosecuting these crimes has made everybody else's lives worse.

The problem is that, without God and His Word, the only way to determine right or wrong is with human reason. Now, human reason is a wonderful thing, but you can't determine morality with it. Our reason has been darkened. And if a human has a reason to want to do something, he'll come up with one that says it's okay. People use human reason as a cover of darkness. Without the Word of God as a lamp to our feet and a light to our path, what is right and what is wrong will always be in doubt.

When we can't tell what is right or wrong, we start making up the rules to the game. That's what we're doing in society. Sexual immorality is running rampant. Lies and social contagion are destroying our children. Why is it that drag queens want to spend so much time with children? Why is it that racism—any kind of racism—is being permitted, defended, and encouraged? The darkness of deceit and societal pressure makes that which is good seem evil and that which evil seem good. Spiritual darkness grips our nation. It's destroying our culture!

And that darkness allows us to lie not only to others but to ourselves. In the darkness, we imagine ourselves to be righteous and good and kind. But it's easy to be self-righteous when nothing we do can be wrong. It's easy to feel morally superior when those we disagree with can only do wrong. This is darkness. Along with the idea that what may be right for you isn't right for someone else. How about murder? How about breaking into somebody's house, beating him over the head with a hammer, and taking all his stuff? How about sleeping with another woman's husband because he doesn't love her anymore? How about slandering your neighbor because he doesn't like it when your dog does its business on his lawn?

The justifications for our sinful actions are just empty words. They might sway those in darkness, but they land flat on the ears of God. Human reason, for all its wisdom, is foolishness to the Divine. When we have only darkness, we can't even recognize evil for what it is.

So God makes the darkness unbearable. He brings us disaster: earthquakes, floods, fire, famine, pandemics, and talking heads. He puts things in our way, causing us to stumble in the darkness of our unbelief. Still, some are so blind and so in love with the darkness that covers their sin, that not even God's efforts to shock us into turning back to Him work. We adapt to the desolation and the death. We accommodate ourselves to our spiritual

blindness. The great tragedy here is that it's not just those people who suffer. All of us do. Their children—or even parents—are hurt. We are denied their friendship and their love. Their love of the darkness hurts us all. Deeply.

We mustn't let the darkness rule. We mustn't become blind to the sin in our lives or in the lives of others. We must not wrap ourselves in darkness and fall asleep spiritually. Instead, we are to remain ever vigilant. If we do fall asleep spiritually, we become unaware of the world's evil, we become unaware of the devil's plans against us. All of us were once darkness, St. Paul says—not just in the dark, but dark and evil and an enemy of God, the darkness was internalized. But just like the mommy or daddy who comes into the room and flips on the light switch, so too does God our Father turn on the light.

Jesus is the Light of the world—God's one and only Son, our Savior. Through His preaching of the Good News, Jesus brought light into the lives of sin-darkened souls. He did this by taking the darkness upon Himself. He took the sin, the self-righteousness, the evil of this world, and the just punishment of God, all of it upon Himself. The very hour He died upon the cross on Mount Calvary, the earth was in deep darkness. All went dark because the Light of the world had been snuffed out.

But three days later, Jesus rose from the dead in the glory and light of Easter morning! God the Father came to the rescue and flipped on the light switch. No longer was the earth in deep darkness, but the light came back on, shining in true glory and radiance. Jesus is the true light, dispelling the darkness and lies of the devil, showing us God's plan of salvation for us and for all the world.

We, who were once in darkness, uncertain of right or wrong, now can see our own sin. We can see it because the light of Christ shines on it. We who were wrapped up in the darkness of our own will and human reason, given to our own desires, now know what is pleasing to God by the light of His Word. We, who were darkness, also have been turned into light itself. With the flip of the light switch, we are transformed, aroused from our spiritual slumber, and made into lights of the Lord.

You were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Life will never again be the same for those who have been transformed by Jesus. We live not as though who fear the darkness, needing a night light to keep boogeymen at bay, but are a light ourselves. God says we live life differently, forgiven, a peculiar people. We live as children of light, not

covering in the darkness fretting and fearful, not covering our sins behind fashionable fig leaves, not scurrying like cockroaches into every dark corner when the light comes on, but we turn the bright beams of Jesus' death into every dark corner of our lives. Sin will never be as much fun again. It will become a frightful, horrible, dark thing. Imagine once having been given the gift of sight, going back to blindness. Imagine once having been given the gift of light and life in Jesus, returning to darkness.

Jesus wishes us never to return to the darkness of uncertainty, of doubt, of fear. Rather, Christ turns on and keeps on the light of faith in our lives. We now walk in the light of the world. We walk in Christ Jesus! We walk in His goodness—looking to Him for our salvation and life. We walk in His righteousness—seeking after His will and not the will of the devil. “Thy will be done.” We walk in truth—openness, honesty, and forthrightness are the signs of the light. Truth, determined alone by God’s Word—the sole rule and norm of Christian faith and life.

As we walk in Christ Jesus, we are light to the world. God’s love flows through us, shining in the darkness. It casts away the fear and despair of those who do not know God. In our smiling faces God radiates. In our smiling faces God shines upon those lost in darkness and the shadow of death. In fervent love to our neighbor, the light of Christ is spread. As the spiritual song says, “This little light of mine, I’m gonna let it shine.” Let it shine, for this little, Gospel light will banish the darkness of death and condemnation. This little, Gospel light brings with it the promise of the resurrection and eternal life.

In Jesus’ name.

The peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ + Jesus.