

COME TO THE LIGHT

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Lamington Presbyterian Church

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Numbers 21:4-9; John 3:14-21

“But those who do what is true come to the light...”

John 3:21

Unless I miss my guess, some of you here today have a deeper acquaintance with darkness than you did just a week or two ago.

I’m referring, of course, to those who’ve gone without electricity — and may still be without it — after the back-to-back Nor’easters.

We were fortunate, at the Manse, not to lose power. Our lights flickered a bit. They never went completely out. But I do remember, vividly, another experience I had with total darkness, some years ago. I was on a mission trip to Cuba, part of a presbytery-to-presbytery partnership.

The Cuban economy was in desperate shape. The cash-strapped government had neglected the infrastructure for decades, especially the power grid. Rolling blackouts in the evenings were common.

On one particular evening, our Cuban hosts were driving us from a church meeting back to the national church camp, where we were staying. The streets of that provincial town were thronged with people. That’s common in a tropical country — the cool of the evening is prime time for getting out of the house and

visiting your neighbors.

Suddenly, in the snap of a finger, everything went dark: and I mean everything. It was one of those infamous rolling blackouts. The only light was coming from our car headlights. The crowds of Cubans were still out there in the streets: milling around, talking, visiting. They were used to the blackouts. They just shrugged their shoulders and went on with what they were doing. As we traveled along, our headlights would pick out one cluster of pedestrians after another. They'd stare back with what could only be called a deer-in-the-headlights look. It was kind of creepy — like we'd been thrown back a couple hundred years in time, to those days when darkness really *was* darkness.

Today's Gospel Lesson from John chapter 3 comes from such a time in human history. **“The light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil.”** It's not so easy for us to grasp the full impact of that sentence because — unlike the Cubans — we rarely experience total darkness.

The Lamington Presbyterians whose bodies are interred in the oldest part of our cemetery had no problem making that connection, during their earthly lives. Their only source of light, after the sun went down, was candles.

Most of their candles were made from tallow — animal fat. The process of rendering fat into candles was dirty, smelly and time-consuming. Beeswax candles worked better: they burned cleaner and more reliably, but only the rich could afford them. Whether tallow or beeswax, candles of any kind were among the costliest items in a Colonial pantry. Our ancestors used them sparingly. They didn't light up the whole house. They carried their single candle from room to room.

Those candles would allow you to sit up for an hour or two beside the fire to read a book, or — for the women — to do some embroidery. Apart from that, the only other thing to do after sundown, in that era, was go to bed.

As for going out and about in the night, that was a rare thing. You tried to avoid it if you could. People who habitually walked the shadowy streets at night could not be trusted. They were probably up to no good. That's what Jesus means by “they loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil.”

All that changed after the year 1882. In that year, in lower Manhattan, the Edison Illuminating Company established the Pearl Street Station, the first central electrical power plant in the United States. Its coal-fired steam engines turned the dynamos that generated electrical current — DC in those early days, before the AC

standard had been set. Initially, Pearl Street Station powered just 400 lamps in 85 households. But Edison’s technology was the wave of the future, and its advance was rapid. In a couple generations, darkness such as Jesus — and our Colonial ancestors — knew so well was no longer part of everyday human experience.

To us today — barring a Nor’easter or hurricane — the setting of the sun is no obstacle to anything we want to do. Too dark to read? Reach over and turn on the lamp. It’s that easy. Even activities like high-school sports are no longer restricted to daylight hours. Athletic fields are illuminated by banks of powerful lights. They can turn night into day at the flick of a switch.

A few years ago I read a fascinating book called *At Day’s Close: Night in Times Past*. It’s based on research done by the author, Roger Ekirch, into the everyday life of our ancestors, before electrification.

Astronomical night, of course, lasts for 12 hours on the average: longer in winter, shorter in summer. But that’s a good deal longer than most people — then or now — typically sleep. Most people in earlier times, reluctant to burn those expensive candles, just went to bed anyway: but they didn’t sleep straight through the night. Typically, they would sleep for several hours, then awaken around midnight. They would then endure a period of wakefulness for an hour or two,

after which they'd fall asleep again until morning.

Ekirch read a lot of diaries from that era. Often, they refer to “the first sleep” and “the second sleep.” Some people would use that period of midnight sleeplessness to do a bit of reading or writing by candle-light. Others would simply lie awake in their beds, listening to the howl of wolves, or the scuttling-about of mice — fearing whatever terrors might be lurking in the darkness.

According to legend, midnight was “the witching hour,” when supernatural forces of evil might emerge to do their worst. Washington Irving mentions the witching hour a couple times in *The Legend of Sleepy Hollow*. That's when the Headless Horseman shows up. Whenever Shakespeare, in one of his plays, has a ghost appear — as in *Hamlet* or *Julius Caesar* — it's on or around the stroke of midnight. This is no accident. It corresponds with that period of wakefulness between the two sleeps.

It was such a common experience that everyone was aware of it. But today we have no concept of it. The two stages of sleep have all but disappeared from the human experience. Our well-lit evenings have actually changed our physiology.

But the pattern is still there, underneath it all. Sleep scientists have experimented with volunteers who go without artificial lights for an extended

period of time. What they’ve discovered is that, without electric lights, most of us revert to this pattern of first and second sleep. It’s hard-wired into our brains. The pattern is waiting to reassert itself if ever our lighting systems should fail completely.

What was true of night in early America was even more true of night in Jesus’ time. Candles had not yet been invented. The only artificial light Jesus and his disciples had were torches and oil lamps. These threw even less light than candles.

When John records Jesus saying, “people loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil,” he’s recalling what goes on out there, in the dark streets, in the interval between first and second sleep. The works of darkness were literally the things you didn’t want others to see you doing, things you’d be ashamed of if you did them in the light of day.

This passage from John 3 is the tail-end of a larger narrative: Jesus’ dialogue with the Pharisee, Nicodemus. John begins that story by informing us how Nicodemus came to Jesus “by night.” Very likely, that was because Nicodemus wanted his visit to be secret.

Why so? Because he was a Pharisee and Jesus was a controversial figure. Scholarly debates have always been big in the Jewish tradition. Surely it would have been easy for Nicodemus to drop in on one of Jesus’ teaching sessions in a local synagogue.

But that would give Jesus more credibility than Nicodemus is willing to accord him just yet. He wants to check him out first, privately: to match his own scholarly wit against this teacher from the hinterlands. And so Nicodemus chooses the hours of darkness. He slips out of his house into the darkened streets. He knows that anyone else he may run into will be no more eager to engage in small-talk than he.

Jesus, of course, famously teaches Nicodemus he must be “born from above” — or, as some have translated it, be “born again.” The Nazarene rabbi is talking a strange, new theological language that’s unknown to Nicodemus. It baffles him. The spiritual path Jesus is laying out is nothing like the one he’s been taught to follow all his life. It’s founded not on generations of scholarly commentary and debate over fine points of law, but rather on the power of the Holy Spirit. As Jesus assures him, this Spirit rushes into a human life like the wind, unpredictable and free. The life of faith is all about trusting God’s Spirit, turning our lives over to God so spiritual rebirth can begin to take place.

It’s at this point that Jesus shares what is, in the eyes of many, the greatest verse in all the Bible, John 3:16: **“For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.”** That verse has been called “the gospel in miniature.” At its heart is the decision to follow Christ that is the way to salvation. Believe in him and you will not perish. You will not sink into everlasting darkness. Trust him, and God will give you the gift of eternal life.

But Jesus doesn’t end there — like so many people who quote the verse out of context. He goes on to make a pointed reference to the *way* Nicodemus has come there that night: in the darkness, in secret. Even though a new and glorious light has come into the world, “people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil.”

See that you don’t number yourself in the company of evildoers, Jesus is saying. This new kind of faith will cause your life to be transformed. Yet, in order for that transformation to happen, you must leave behind all those patterns of thinking that could cause you to slip back into darkness. It can only happen through a fresh beginning, a change so radical it can be likened to rebirth. Such is the path from darkness into light.

You needn’t remake your life yourself, Nicodemus. Who could do such a

thing, anyway? It would be like lighting an oil lamp and expecting it to triumph over the night. The best any of us can do, in this life — even at our best moments — is to kindle such a flame and hold its feeble light high. But then, we need to do something else. We need to wait. We await the coming of the one force in the universe powerful enough to vanquish darkness. That, of course, is the dawn.

The prophet Malachi refers to the Messiah as “the sun of righteousness” (s-u-n) [Malachi 4:2]. It is Christ’s light that saves us.

See, the soft streaks of light are starting to appear in the eastern sky. Come to the light. Let your small light become lost in the greater light of God’s glory. Come to the light, and be saved.

These days of Lent are an excellent time to examine our lives, to discern the ways in which we are still preferring darkness over light. May we all have the courage, and the faith, to turn to the light of Jesus Christ, and find new life in him!

Let us pray:

**Visit then this soul of mine;
Pierce the gloom of sin and grief.
Fill me, radiancy divine;
Scatter all my unbelief;
More and more thyself display,
Shining to the perfect day.
Amen.**