

From Darkness to Light

In the name of the beloved Son of God, dear friends in Christ: One of the main overarching themes of Holy Scripture is the movement from darkness to light. We see it already in the first few verses of Genesis. The newly created heavens and earth are shrouded in utter darkness. Everything is pitch black until God speaks. And then at his Word the light comes on. Each day that follows then we are told “and there was evening and there was morning” the next day. So the day begins at sunset – as soon as it is dark – and then moves toward the light. The same is true of the Old Testament lunar calendar. Each month began at the new moon, when it was totally in shadow, and then went on through its cycle of waxing and waning; but again it’s a movement from darkness to light.

The same thing happens in the unfolding of God’s revelation of himself and his plan of salvation for humanity. As time goes on God reveals more and more so that was once dark and cloudy becomes increasingly clear and bright. We see it especially in the contrast between the Old and the New Testaments. In the Old Christ is revealed to us in types, shadows, and scattered prophecies; but then in the New we have the full revelation of Jesus the Savior. And even *his* revelation unfolds to us from darkness to light as we’ve seen throughout the Epiphany season. It begins with a single star, a tiny point of light in the dark heavens that leads the wise men to find the infant Jesus. And then it proceeds through the early ministry of Jesus, as the largely unknown Nazarene peasant steps out of obscurity and by degrees with his preaching and various miracles reveals that he is far more than any man. It reaches its climax today with him on the mount of Transfiguration emanating glorious divine light showing himself to be none other than the incarnate Son of God.

So, like I said, this theme of moving from darkness to light permeates the entire Scripture. That’s why it’s only natural for us to see the Apostle Paul, a thorough student of Scripture, utilizing this same theme in today’s Epistle taken from his second letter to the church at Corinth. We’ve talked about this perpetually troubled congregation before. And we learned that if you can name a problem a church might possibly have, they had it at Corinth – in spades. In fact, Paul’s lengthy first letter to them reads like a manual for fixing broken churches.

Now, we can only hope that they applied Paul’s inspired wisdom toward repairing some of the problems they were experiencing. But by the time Paul gets around to writing his second letter to them (from which today’s text is taken), they had sprouted a whole batch of new problems. Most of these were caused by a group of self designated “super apostles” who showed up one day claiming that while it was very admirable that Paul through his missionary efforts had got them started in the Christian faith – moving them from their pagan darkness to the Light of Christ (there’s that theme again) – Paul had not nearly taken them far enough. No, they said, while he seems to be a really sharp guy, poor Paul doesn’t quite understand the fullness of the Gospel. But don’t you worry, because we are here to set you straight.

Now, we don’t know everything these “super apostles” were teaching. It seems they spent a good deal of their time simply telling their hearers how misguided Paul was. But it’s pretty clear that at least part of what they were saying falls in line with the false teaching of the Judaizers. These were Jewish converts to Christianity who followed on Paul’s heels wherever he went. As soon as Paul moved on to plant a church someplace else, they’d show up and tell the new congregation – that consisted mostly of Gentiles, that is, non-Jews – that the only way

to be a good and proper Christian was to first be a faithfully observant Jew, by which I mean they had to follow all the rules and ordinances of the old covenant that God gave to Israel through Moses. That meant, among other things, that the Gentile Christians would have to begin celebrating the old covenant feasts and festivals, observing the Saturday Sabbath, keeping the Jewish dietary restrictions, and all their males would need to be circumcised. According to those who taught this, a person's righteous standing before God consisted not only in trusting in Jesus and his saving work on the cross, but also in keeping and following all these other rules. So, your salvation becomes a matter of not only what Christ has done, but also what you must do.

Now, as Lutherans, you know that's a distortion of the Christian Gospel. Any time your works are added to Christ's accomplished work, the true Gospel is covered up. That's the point Paul is making in the first part of the reading. Our hope is in Christ. And because we have this hope we are very confident. There's nothing hidden here. Not like Moses who used to have to cover his face with a veil. Paul is referring to how when Moses used to meet with the Lord afterward his face would glow with bright light – so bright that the Israelites couldn't stand to look him. Like staring at the sun, it would blind them. So Moses would cover up.

This light from Moses was residual though. It was like one of those glow-in-the-dark balls or Frisbees. You put it under a light source and the phosphorescent chemicals absorb the light energy. Then when you take it into a dark place, the light energy is released, dissipating over time. That's how it was for Moses. Being close to the Lord he absorbed some of God's glory. That's what shone forth from his face afterward.

A few points to make here: first that Moses was not the light source. The Lord was. So we need to distinguish sharply this light coming from Moses and the light coming from Jesus in his transfiguration. Moses had borrowed light. For Jesus it's organic. It's part of who he is because he is the Lord of life and the Light of the world. Second, there was a lesson in the light reflected from Moses. That the Israelites could not bear to look at him was meant to teach that as sinners we cannot look upon the glory and holiness of God. That would destroy us. Third, like a glow-in-the-dark toy, the light from Moses' face faded away over time. It came to an end. And in that sense it was like the old covenant itself. The rules God gave Moses about how the Israelites were to live differently than their neighbors – and I'm not talking about the moral law that has to do with questions of right and wrong that apply to everyone, but rather the ceremonial laws that the Judaizers were trying to foist upon the Gentile Christians – those rules were meant to point to Christ. Now that we have the fullness of Christ revealed, we don't need those pointers anymore. They fade away. We've got the new covenant: salvation by grace through faith in Christ crucified. The old covenant is brought to an end. Paul wants the Christians at Corinth to understand this so that they don't fall for the teaching of the self-proclaimed "super apostles".

Having made this point, Paul moves on to contrast his method of teaching with that of the super apostles. Again, it's a contrast between light and dark. Paul says that he and his fellow teachers have renounced disgraceful and underhanded ways. They refuse to practice cunning or to tamper with God's Word. The clear implication is that's what his detractors are doing. And that makes sense. These Judaizing super apostles only show up after Paul leaves a place. They won't engage him in open debate over God's Word. They won't because they know they would lose the argument. Anyone with a clear head would be able to see that they were twisting and distorting the Scriptures to make their points. Paul says that his side lays it all right out there on the table so that by the open statement of the truth we commend ourselves to everyone's conscience in the sight of God. With us it's what you see is what you get. You got

questions? Bring them on. We'll answer them from God's Word. We will show you that what we are teaching is the truth. Our opponents can't do that.

And yet he admits that some people still won't get it. "Our Gospel is veiled" to some, he says; specifically, "those who are perishing". Why? Because "the god of this world [he means Satan] has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the Gospel of the glory of Christ." Sinful humankind wants so much to believe in a way of salvation that depends on me and my efforts – at least to some degree. We want a "gospel" that leaves room for human pride – which just happens to be the sin that caused Satan's fall. The true Gospel leaves no room for our pride. The true Gospel is all grace. It's all gift. It's all Christ and his work. And those blinded by Satan, who demand a gospel that depends on me to some extent, won't ever see the full glory of Christ and mercy of God revealed in the cross.

That brings Paul to the final contrast between his side and the super apostles. "What we proclaim is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, with ourselves your servants for Jesus' sake." The super apostles *are* proclaiming themselves. They're saying that they are better and more righteous than Paul because they keep the old covenant rules. "Look at what we are doing. Aren't we great? Follow us and you can be great too!"

But if you think you're great in the sight of God because of what *you* do, then you are detracting from the glory that belongs to Christ alone. You've put a veil over the true Gospel and now you're in the dark. A true Christian teacher points you to Christ and to him alone. That's where he wants your focus to be. So, come out of the darkness of self and walk in the Light of Christ. And you will. "For God who said, 'Let light shine out of darkness', has shone in our hearts to give the Light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ." In him alone be our trust and hope. And to him alone be the glory now and forever. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!