

Rise and Shine

In the name of him who gives us his flesh to eat and his blood to drink that we may live forever, dear friends in Christ: I am a morning person. As a rule I wake early, get up, and probably get more done in the next two or three hours with respect to study and sermon preparation than I will in all the rest of the day. Others I know are decidedly not morning people. For them waking and getting up is the most difficult obstacle to overcome each day. It's as if their beds exert a massive gravitational field that keeps pulling them back. They have to muster tremendous force to reach escape velocity. Even then, having done so, they wander about as if in a fog for a few hours, unable to concentrate or participate in a meaningful conversation at least until they can feel the effect of that second cup of coffee. But here I speak of worldly realities.

In spiritual matters, none of us is by nature a morning person. We'd rather hang the "Do Not Disturb" sign on the bedroom door, put down the shades to keep out light, pull the blankets over our heads, and snuggle into the comfort of spiritual slumber. Just leave me alone.

In today's Epistle, Paul is playing the role of a military Drill Instructor storming through the barracks, violently tossing us out of our bunks, and shouting at the top of his lungs that it's time to rise and shine. He's directing us to get up and actually *live* the Christian life.

Allow me to put his remarks in context. Our text comes from the fifth chapter of Paul's letter to the Christian congregations in and around Ephesus. At this point he has already established how blessed his readers are to have been chosen by God from before the foundation of the world to be redeemed by Jesus the Savior. He's reminded them that their chosen status was achieved purely by God's grace. "By grace you have been saved through faith, and this not of yourselves; it is the gift of God." Not only did God give his Son to die for you, but he also gave you the faith to believe and trust in Jesus unto salvation. He's reminded them of what they had been formerly, before they knew the love of God in Christ Jesus. They had been strangers and aliens to God, separated from him, existing without hope, and doomed to destruction. But when they were dead in sin, God made them alive in Christ through the message of salvation and the gift of his Holy Spirit. He raised them from death and joined them to his people as his children and equal heirs with Israel, his chosen of old.

In view of all this, in the chapter preceding today's text, Paul warns them not to turn back to their former ways of life when they behaved as the rest of the Gentiles. They are darkened in their understanding, hardened in heart, practicing every kind of impurity, deceived by their sinful desires – as you once were; but you were taught to put off that old self and put on the new person, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness. You woke to a new way of life.

And every day you need to wake up and do it again. Paul recognizes the powerful gravitational pull of the sinful flesh always wanting to revert back to the darkness – to "stay in bed", as it were. And the Greek culture of the day was dark indeed. Lacking a biblical view of morality, of what's right and what's wrong according to the Creator, the Gentiles were free to decide for themselves what's right. And oddly enough, in such a world view, what's right is what's right for me. So if it's to my advantage to cheat you, or deceive you, or steal from you, or lie about you, or actually harm you, well, then that's right for me. I can justify myself. But don't

you dare do it to me because then I'll get angry and make you wish you hadn't. I'll get my revenge.

With regard to sexual morality especially, the Gentile world was ... what shall we say? *Permissive?* What today is called being "open-minded"? You name it, every perversion of this good gift of God was acceptable: fornication, adultery, prostitution, spouse swapping, homosexuality, pedophilia, pederasty, wild, drunken orgies ... only incest was off the table. Even the Gentiles drew a line there. But if you sent your adolescent son to study under a teacher, for example, it was taken for granted that part of the teacher's payment was ... well, you can figure it out. It was a mess. This was the morally dark culture the Ephesians lived in – and of which they had formerly been a part.

As much as I hate to say it, it pretty well describes the secular culture that surrounds us in our time. The only difference is that most of us grew up in the Church and were never steeped in that culture as the Ephesians Christians had been. A biblical view of morality was part of our upbringing. But it's not like we are unaware of the darkness that's out there. And it's not like we don't have the sinful flesh clinging to us that longs to be and remain a part of it. Each and every day we too need to wake up.

We also need to heed Paul's warning to not be deceived, but rather to walk in the light as children of the light – for the fruit of the light is found in all that is good and right and true. We are to take no part in the unfruitful works of darkness, but instead *expose* them. And that's what I want to focus on in this message, this exposition of works of darkness that is part of our spiritual waking up. That's what light does. It exposes what's hidden in the dark. And we need to expose it in three different places.

First, we need to expose it in ourselves. Each and every day – or perhaps multiple times a day – we need to examine ourselves honestly in the perfect light of God's Holy Law. We need to expose to ourselves the sin within: where we have by any thought, word, or action violated God's righteous demands and/or failed to think, say, or do the good we should have. The purpose in exposing these sins is so that we can recognize the wrath of God we justly deserve on account of them, feel sorrow for having offended the Lord by them, and confess them to him relying on his mercy in Christ Jesus to forgive us. This is what we learned in the Catechism, Baptism Part Four: *What does such baptizing with water indicate? Answer: It indicates that the Old Adam in us should by daily contrition and repentance be drowned and die with all sins and evil desires, and that a new man should daily emerge and arise to live before God in righteousness and purity forever.* This is the first and most important part of our spiritual awakening each day. It's how we rise and shine as individuals.

Second (and there's a lot of confusion out there about this one), we need to expose it in our fellow Christians. I'm talking about those who confess the name of Christ and yet are caught up in ongoing sin or are actively practicing a sinful lifestyle. In Christian love it is your duty to help them see their sin and the damage it is doing to them and to their relationship to God so that they can repent, be forgiven, and receive the strength of the Spirit to resist the temptation in the future. To fail to do so, to do anything less, is a sin against them.

And yes, I know the objections: "Who am I to judge? I'm a sinner too; how can I condemn anyone else." Listen: you are not the judge nor are you condemning anyone by pointing out their sin and calling them to repent. God is the judge. He will condemn. You are attempting to help them to *avoid* God's judgment and condemnation. You are trying to save them from the hellfire that will result if they continue in their sin. The problem is that they can't

see the danger. Sin is darkness. It blinds one's spiritual eyes. It hardens the heart. It deceives the mind. Such a person needs you to turn on the light and say "Wake up!"

If a friend or relative had an addiction, say to alcohol or to drugs or to gambling or to some other self-destructive compulsion, you would intervene to help get them out of it. Of course you would. Then why wouldn't you do the same thing for a sin that was destroying their soul? The answer to that question is usually fear: fear of offending, fear of what they'll say in response, fear of causing division or disturbing peace in the family, fear of whatever. But perfect love cast out fear. Yes, the immediate result of your turning the light on may offend the sinner, provoke them to say awful things, and cause conflict in relationships. Sinners hate the light. They'd rather stay in bed asleep. But love for them compels you to do what you can to wake them up so that they too can rise and shine.

Third, we need to expose the works of darkness in the world at large. This is a bit trickier because the secular world does not think of itself as bound by God's commands. So, you take something like the great evil that is abortion by which some three hundred thousand of our fellow citizens are slaughtered each year before they can see the light of day; many, perhaps most of those who don't adhere to God's Word don't see a problem with it. But part of that is because of the language they use to hide in the dark what it really is: the murder of infants. So, it's not a baby; it's just a clump of parasitic cells. It's not ripping a child from the womb; it's a medical procedure. It's not a moral outrage; it's women's health. In love, we must speak the truth to our culture both as individuals and collectively as the Church. With our truthful words we expose the darkness – not just about this issue, but about every other societal ill: poverty, homelessness, racism, the collapse of family life, injustice, corruption, what have you.

The other way we expose the darkness of the world around us in by modeling what it means to live as God's children, by walking before the world in the light in the Christ. We show forth in our lives Christian virtues like patience, forgiveness, charity, hospitality, kindness, gentleness, and acts of love. These shine like a light in a world growing increasingly loveless and dark. And yes, it will repel some; but others will be drawn to the light. They'll see our lives full of Christian hope and joy and love, and it will cause them to ask, "What makes you this way?" And that will be opportunity to witness and share the light of Christ so that, coming to faith, these too can rise and shine.

So, in summary, rising each day to walk in the light, we expose the deeds of darkness in ourselves, in our fellow Christians, and in our surrounding secular culture. And as we do, we encourage one another. We build up ourselves and others in holy faith by worshipping together, hearing and studying God's Word, participating in Holy Communion, and, as Paul says, by addressing each other in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs. Our joint singing in the Church is not an exercise in showing off how well (or badly) our voices sound. Each hymn or psalm is a sermon in itself by which we both confess our faith in Jesus and reinforce it. They are light in the darkness. They are spiritual food for the journey as together we rise, shine, and walk with him, making melody in our hearts, and always and for everything giving thanks to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ for all that he has done for us to bring us out of the darkness into the glory of his marvelous light. In his holy name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!