***CHILDREN OF LIGHT***

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Texts: Ephesians 5:1-2, 8-17 and John 8:12

 It has been a long, strange week! The rhythm of day to day living has been disrupted by an invisible virus that once seemed far, far away but now is much too close to home. The ordinary things of life that we did just two weeks ago – grocery shopping, working out at the gym, complaining about school, eating out, squirming side-by-side in a pew – have been interrupted or revised, or become taboo. The new normal of day to day living is not very normal, and pulsing in the background is the steady beat of breaking news about the novel coronavirus and its inexorable march around the globe and across our nation and down the Valley (or up the Valley or into the Valley). *Hunker* has been resuscitated from the *rarely used word* *pile* as we have hunkered down in our homes in order to be safe and to keep safe those we love. Such hunkering has created new challenges of isolation, loneliness, and boredom, with only the miracles of modern technology – like this Facebook Live connection – to keep us connected. *A Tale of Two Cities* opens with that famous line: *It was the best of times. It was the worst of times.* Most of us have little doubt as to which end of the spectrum these times fall, with fervent hope that these times don’t go from bad to worst.

 Across the pages of Scripture and especially in John’s Gospel, images of light and darkness are used to delineate the good and the bad. At the very beginning, out of the primordial darkness, God says, “Let there be light!” and there is light as God begins to create something from nothing. In Egypt at the time of the plagues the angel of death sweeps through in the dark of night, killing the firstborn of all living things except those marked by the blood of the lamb in the Passover, and the Hebrew slaves are granted their release. By the dark of night the Pharisee Nicodemus comes to Jesus seeking insight to enlighten his confused mind about what Jesus is saying, only to leave more confused when Jesus tells him he must be born again. It is in the dark of night that Jesus is arrested, beaten, tried, convicted, and condemned. He is crucified in the bright light of day, but the sky grows ominously dark at the moment of his death when, in the words of the spiritual, “*the sun refused to shine*”. The good news of the empty tomb is found by the women at dawn just as darkness is lifting to make way for the first light of day. Darkness is not a good thing in the Bible, for in the darkness lie the unknown, the chaotic, the confused, the evil, and sometimes the specter of death.

 This coronavirus has some things in common with that biblical darkness. It harbors the largely unknown in its microscopic body, creating chaos in its wake, and bringing the specter of death to communities around the world. It preys on our imaginations like things that go bump in the night. Its power is in being unknown and uncontrolled and sometimes deadly, thus stoking fear among us. It lives in our midst by the light of day, but its home is in the biblical darkness, for once it is brought to light and exposed, once its weaknesses are identified and attacked by faithful hand-washing and social distancing and all those steps the CDC keeps reminding us of to curb its transmission, once its vulnerabilities are discovered and anti-viral weapons are developed to ease its sting and vaccinate against its onslaught, then COVID-19 loses its power to strike fear in our hearts and becomes yet another virus of which to be wary and prepared, but not terrified.

 The antidote to the darkness that we find in Scripture is light. Into the primordial chaos comes God’s creation of light. Into the darkness of a Bethlehem night come angels singing their glorias in excelsis Deo to shepherds keeping watch over their flocks and bringing tidings of great joy for all people in the birth of a child who is the light of the world. Out of the darkness of Good Friday comes the rosy promise of Easter’s dawn.

 God does not leave us in darkness! God is present with us there to sustain us, to comfort us, and to assure us that the dawn is coming. In the words of the psalmist, “Weeping may linger for the night, but joy comes with the morning.” “The light shines in the darkness,” writes John, “and the darkness cannot overcome it!” That is the good news that we bear to a world that seems to be shrouded in coronaviral darkness – the light shines and the darkness cannot overcome it! Even in the darkest darkness there is hope. Especially in the darkness there is hope – hope of a brighter day, hope of a better day, hope of a healthier day, hope grounded in a God who comes to us as the light of the world to dispel all the darkness, even the darkness of a COVID-19. The first challenge for us is in these dark days is to remember that good news and to wait patiently for the light, to hold on to hope that the light will come, to trust in the One who ***IS*** the light who can overcome any darkness – including this one! Into our darkness God comes with these words: DO NOT BE AFRAID. I AM WITH YOU. To remember and believe that good news is our first challenge as disciples of Christ and children of light. And the second is this: to live as children of light, as Paul writes to the Ephesians.

 In 1944 theologian Reinhold Niebuhr wrote a book entitled *The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness*. It is a discussion of democratic theory written in a time when the whole world was at war. In Niebuhr’s view, the capacity for justice made democracy possible, but the inclination to injustice made democracy necessary.[[1]](#endnote-1) Democratic checks and balances serve to curb abuses of power and self-serving actions. Niebuhr was realistic about the good and evil which lie within each of us. Children of light, he says, are “those who seek to bring self-interest under the discipline of a more universal law and in harmony with a more universal good.”[[2]](#endnote-2) In other words, children of light are those who are willing to place another good ahead of their own, a public good ahead of individual interest, God’s good ahead of our own selfish good. How do we do that? In the words of the epistle to the Ephesians: *try to find out what is pleasing to the Lord*.

 Across the generations from the pages of Scripture we hear what is pleasing to the Lord. From the mouths of prophets we hear:

* *What does the Lord require of you, but to do justice, love kindness and walk humbly with your God!* (Micah 6:8)
* *Let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream!* (Amos 5:24)

From the mouth of Jesus we hear:

* *Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength and love your neighbor as yourself. Upon these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.*
* *Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.*
* *Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven.*
* *Forgive as you have been forgiven.*
* *Seek first the Kingdom of God.*
* *Do not judge so that you may not be judged.*
* *In everything, do to others as you would have them do to you.*

We are called to be imitators of God, to have the same mind that is in Christ, to be perfect as our heavenly Father is perfect, to reflect the light that is in us as children of the One who is the light of the world. Those are standards that we cannot attain perfectly, but standards for which we strive nevertheless as children of God called to be children of light. At their heart, those standards are grounded in love!

 If you wonder what you should do in these anxious days, just do this: love God and love your neighbor. Love your neighbor enough to wash your hands and keep social distance. Love your neighbor enough not to hug your neighbor now. Love your neighbor enough to make a call to her or to run an errand for him or to stay away from them in order to keep them safe. Love your neighbor enough to shelter in place so that you do not become ill and fill up a precious hospital bed. Love your neighbor enough to forego hoarding groceries or toilet paper or hand sanitizer or Brussel sprouts that others might need tomorrow. Love your neighbor enough to be kind in your interactions with others, even when they are testy from nerves rubbed raw from anxiety. Love your neighbors enough to pray for them. And love God enough to do all those things, for it is in loving our neighbors that we show our love for God and reflect God’s light to a weary, worried world.

 “Dear God,” writes little Nan, “I bet it’s very hard for you to love all of everybody in the whole world. There are only four people in our family and I can never do it. But I’m trying. Really, I’m trying.” And so are we –really trying in these trying days, trying to love all of everybody in ways big and small, trying to be patient, trying to live as children of light, trying to please God in all that we do wherever we are. Try to do the best you can for your neighbor, for yourself, and for God each and every day, and in so doing, may God’s light shine in you and through you. For the light still shines in the darkness and no darkness, not even this one, can overcome it! Amen

1. Reinhold Niebuhr, The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness, Charles Scribner’s & Sons: New York, 1972, p.xiii [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Id. at p.10 [↑](#endnote-ref-2)