

HIDING IN THE DARK

Numbers 21:4-9

John 3:14-21

There is a popular thing these days called a web pole. A question is asked and you can go on line to answer. They might ask, "How are you celebrating St. Patrick's Day," or, "Do you think the Red Sox will win the World Series." There was one pole question this week that really caught my attention. Here is the question: "In order to save energy should we turn off the street lights at night." Let's think about that question. When else would you turn on street lights except at night? What good is a light if it is not turned on? How else would illumine the dark places at night except by light? And would we save money on lights only to spend money paying the cost of auto accidents and the crime that comes with the dark?

But it seems many love the dark, the negative complains and destructive comments. The fatal sin in the wilderness was complaining. I know it doesn't sound as bad as murder or adultery or armed robbery, but it was just as serious in its consequences. The people of Israel were in the wilderness between Egypt and Canaan after they had left Egypt. Their route required them to skirt the land of Edom. This detour made the Israelites cranky and it brought up complaints they had raised to Moses before: "Our slavery in Egypt was better than this. We're going to die out here in the wilderness."

They complained not only against their leader Moses but also against God. That turned out to be a real bad idea. God sent poisonous serpents among them, who bit them, and many of the people died. They came back to Moses with the admission that they had sinned against him and against God, and they pleaded with Moses to intervene with God on their behalf. When Moses did so, God told him to fashion a serpent out of bronze and place it on a pole. God instructed that anyone who was bitten by a live serpent should look at the bronze serpent on the pole. And when they did so, they would recover and live.

Some chose to look down to the darkness and died. Everyone is not willing to admit they have lived in the darkness and grumbled about their leaders and about God. Many are unwilling to trust anything but their own opinion of things. Many are unwilling to look up because they have no particular relationship with the God who promises us new life.

This leads on to John 3:16, one of those passages of scripture which, in our culture, grew in popularity as a sign held up at football games when a field goal or extra point was being attempted. At some point a few years ago it disappeared from view and I don't know why. Many of us we saw it week after week during football games: John 3:16. It is one thing to recite the words it is quite another thing to receive them into our heart.

An unknown author told of a time in the city of Chicago, one cold, dark night, when a blizzard was setting in. A little boy was selling newspapers on the corner but it was so cold that he was hardly selling any. He walked up to a policeman and said, "Mister, you wouldn't happen to know where a poor boy could find a warm place to sleep tonight would you? You see, I sleep in a box up around the corner and its awful cold in there for tonight. Sure would be nice to have a warm place to stay."

The policeman looked down at the little boy and said, "You go down the street to that big white house and you knock on the door. When they come to the door you just say John 3:16, and they will let you in." So he did. He walked up the steps and knocked on the door, and a lady answered. He looked up and said, "John 3:16." The lady said, "Come on in, son." She took him in and she sat him down in a comfy rocker in front of a warm and glowing fireplace, and she went off. The boy sat there for a while and thought to himself: John 3:16...I don't understand it, but it sure makes a cold boy warm.

Soon she came back and asked him "Are you hungry?" He said, "Well, I haven't eaten in some time, and I guess I could stand a little bit of food." The lady took him in the kitchen and sat him down to a table full of wonderful food. He ate and ate until he couldn't eat any more. Then he thought to himself: John 3:16... Boy, I don't understand it but it sure makes a hungry boy full.

She took him upstairs to a bathroom to a huge bathtub filled with warm water, and he sat there and soaked for a while. As he soaked, he thought to himself: John 3:16... I don't understand it, but it sure makes a dirty boy clean.

The lady came in and got him. She took him to a room, tucked him into a feather bed, pulled the covers up around his neck, kissed him goodnight and turned out the lights. As he lay in the darkness and looked out the window

at the snow coming down on that cold night, he thought to himself: John 3:16... I don't understand it but it sure makes a tired boy rested.

The next morning the lady came back up and took him down again to that same table full of food. After he ate, she took him back to that same comfy rocker in front of the fireplace and picked up her Bible. She sat down in front of him and looked into his young face. "Do you understand John 3:16?" He replied, "No, Ma'am, I don't. The first time I ever heard it was last night when the policeman told me to use it." She opened the Bible to John 3:16 and began to explain to him about Jesus. He thought: John 3:16. I don't understand it, but it sure makes a lost boy feel safe.

Most of us can honestly say that we don't understand it either, how God was willing to send his Son to die for us. We don't understand the agony of the Father as he watched Jesus suffer. We don't understand the intense love for us that kept Jesus on the cross till the end. Maybe we don't understand John 3:16, but it sure does make life worth living.

John 3:16 is what Martin Luther called the gospel in miniature. The heart of the gospel is summarized right there. But it does not end there. Jesus said those who believe are not condemned but Jesus also warned of those who are condemned. If there is grace there must also be judgment. If we are not guilty before God then there is no need for forgiveness.

I am reminded of a friend of ours who is a pharmacist in New Hampshire. Because of the danger of the pharmacy being robbed he has a license to carry a gun. He told us about the time he took his daughter to the local mall to go clothes shopping. He waited in the food court. There arrived at the mall a group of youth with their gothic clothes and black makeup and various piercing and chains and one wearing a spiked dog collar around his neck.

Our friend watched them as they wandered through the food court trying to look menacing. The teen wearing the dog collar looked at him looking at them. The dog collar wearing youth snarled at the pharmacist, "You have a problem?" He said, "No. You have a problem. You think you are a dog." Our friend then leaned back and pulled aside his coat revealing his gun. The kids screamed and ran like scared rabbits shouting about the gun and the whole food court ran out with them.

Mall security arrived on the scene and demanded that our friend the pharmacist hand over his gun. They were armed with nothing. He said, "You are rent-a-cops. You get the real cops and I will show them my permit." Eventually the real police arrived, he showed them his permit, people returned to their burgers and one young lady will forever have a story to tell about her dad.

Mall security guards are not real police officers. They do not have powers to arrest people or carry guns. Mostly what they really have the authority to do is to call the real police. Sometimes God is treated like a mall cop. God has some of the nice window dressings that mall cops can have nice things like uniforms and badges and hats and an occasional Segue. God has nice crocuses and church steeples and the music of Handel and an occasional rainbow. But if you do not believe that God has the capacity to condemn then you cannot believe God has the power to forgive.

It is like the story of a minister who visited a family which had a four-year-old daughter. She was so excited that the minister had come to her house that she wanted to do everything possible to impress him. With her mother's help, she served him cookies and lemonade, she showed him her room, and then she asked, "Would you like to see Jesus?"

The minister said, "Why, of course!" She ran to her closet, climbed up on a chair and got a little ceramic figurine of Jesus and brought it for him to see. "That's beautiful," he said, "Thank you for showing it to me." "You're welcome," she replied, "Now I've got to go and put Jesus back on the shelf where he belongs." And that is where some like to keep Jesus: on the shelf and in the dark, neither confessing failures nor seeking forgiveness.

People did their worst to Jesus in the dark. The authorities waited until it was dark to arrest Jesus when the crowds of the city had mostly gone to their place of rest. There would have been few to see what was happening. Those who might have heard a cry of alarm were too frightened of the dark to go out. Jesus was tried and tormented and tortured in the dark. His death was decided in the dark. That is where evil operates – hiding in the dark.

One of the biggest issues being discussed today is the hidden finances of Bernie Madoff. Year after year he kept it hidden, masked with seemingly generous payoffs and financial obfuscation. He hired people whose job was not to reveal the true finances but to hide them. And at some level people

who invested choose to be kept in the dark, ignoring deliberately obscure financial reports and audits by unknown firms. They were not willing to expose his financial reports to the light of day, just cash the checks they received. Other institutions try to keep billions of bonuses a secret claiming that somehow revealing that would reveal a trade secret. It would just reveal the truth, but coming from darkness into light can be very painful.

Evil chooses to hide in the dark. Over the years we have owned 4 homes and I cannot recall ever reading all the fine print on a mortgage. It is written in small print and technical language so we will not want to read or be able to understand it. You arrive at a closing and just signing the papers and turning over money can take hours. To actually read all the documentation and ask questions of clarification and to really understand what you just read can take days. If conditions of mortgages and credit cards and other loans were made as clear as day our economy would not be in the mess it is today. But there seems to be a love of keeping people in the dark.

And the fact is that most of us have stuff we would like kept in the dark. Most of us have things for which we feel shame and about which we would feel significant embarrassment were it made known. What God has done in Christ is like what was done in the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa. Some terrible things were done to the people of South Africa before Nelson Mandela became president. But instead of legal prosecution people were given a choice. Confess what you have done and you will be forgiven. Deny what you have done and you will stand trial. Confess to Jesus what you have done and you will be forgiven. Deny it and you will be condemned.

Jesus taught us that those who seek to do evil seek to do it in the night, behind closed door, in hidden ledgers. Those who follow the way of Jesus do things that do not have to be hidden because of personal shame or legal violations. We seek to do good so that the love of Christ is shown brightly in our world.

As ambassadors for Christ it is our job to tell people to look up. Look at the light. Stop staring at the dark, spot focusing on negative attacks. Stop judging because judging is the job of the God almighty. We are all sinners who have fallen short of the glory of God. Look with us at the light and trust Jesus when he says, "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. “Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.”

March 22, 2009

The Federated Church of Hyannis

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