

THE PROBLEMS WITH DARK AND LIGHT

Order of Service (bulletin)

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Video (recorded live stream)

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March 15

Lent 4

Ephesians 5:8-14

There was a time when you were darkness, but now you are light in Christ. Live as children of the light. Light produces every kind of goodness, justice, and truth. Be correct in your judgement of what pleases our Saviour. Take no part in deeds done in darkness, which bear no fruit; rather, expose them. It's shameful even to mention the things these people do in secret; but when such deeds are exposed and seen in the light of day, everything that becomes visible is light. That's why we read, "Awake, O sleeper, arise from the dead, and Christ will give you light."

Psalm 23 (hymn lyrics by H. W. Baker)

The King of love my shepherd is, whose goodness faileth never. I nothing lack if I am his, and he is mine forever. Where streams of living water flow, my ransomed soul he leadeth; and where the verdant pastures grow, with food celestial feedeth. Perverse and foolish, oft I strayed, but yet in love he sought me; and on his shoulder gently laid, and home, rejoicing, brought me. In death's dark vale I fear no ill, with thee, dear Lord, beside me; thy rod and staff my comfort still, thy cross before to guide me. Thou spreadst a table in my sight; thy unction grace bestoweth; and oh, what transport of delight from thy pure chalice floweth! And so through all the length of days, thy goodness faileth never; Good Shepherd, may I sing thy praise within thy house forever.



Things have come to a pretty past.

Our romance is growing flat.

For you like this and the other

while I go for this and that.

You like potato and I like potahto.

You like tomato and I like tomahto.

Potato. Potahto. Tomato. Tomahto.

Let's call the whole thing off.

You know, George and Ira Gershwin knew that some disagreements were just simply so wide that there was no middle ground that could be dealt with. The Apostle Paul was a Greek-speaking citizen of Rome living amongst the Jewish diaspora, the Jewish people living outside of the Near East. In fact, Paul was from a community called Tarsus, which was the capital city of the Roman province of Cilicia. Tarsus was a wealthy Roman metropolis. It was on the northeast shore of the Mediterranean Sea in what would be south central

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southern Turkey on a modern map. Tarsus had famed schools of rhetoric and stoic philosophy. Paul lived in the Roman Empire context interspersed with the philosophical theories of Plato and the Pythagoreans particularly Paul grew up in the context of Greek dualism: that reality is divided into two distinct but opposite realms.

- The material world of the body and the physical,
- the eternal world of the mind and the soul.

And this philosophy flavored the latter more than the former. One was supposed to aspire to the eternal world of mind and soul and you set aside the material world of body and physical. Paul dedicates several of his teachings to comparing and prioritizing spirit over flesh or mind over body. Dualism came natural to Paul.

In today's reading, the contrast is between darkness and light. Again, Paul picks the favorite, live as children of the light. Now, I understand this metaphoric comparison as I'm sure that the Ephesians did. Before the electric era, cities weren't yet dominated by light pollution. When the sun set, darkness was a clear and stark contrast to the light of day. And so unless somebody had a real significant important reason to be living life after the sun went down, it was not a good use of one's time of wood/fuel to keep things lit. Night was for retreating to one's house or tent and getting some sleep until the next day dawned.

Several weeks ago, I referred to the Apple TV series *Pluribus*, where all of the all but 13 people in the world had been mysteriously connected into a hive mind, eliminating conflict between people. Crime was gone in an instant. There's one point where the joined decide that it makes sense to turn off all the power at night because, except for essential services like hospitals, or certain factories, people were sleeping, resting. They weren't out and about and there was no need to deter any crime because there is none. Everybody was of one mind and they're all getting along.

Of course, the first century world *did* have crime. But a communitywide street light system had not yet emerged. And as such, if someone was out at night, it was natural to be a little bit afraid of what might be lurking in some unlit corner. And nighttime had a reputation of providing cover for any number of activities that would not withstand the public scrutiny of daylight.

Now sadly this dark light dualistic imagery has been exploited into the realms of racial superiority where light and dark, as concepts of photon and physics, become light and dark as in the color of skin. The kinds of scriptural references like we have today have been used (and are still used in some circles) to justify slavery and oppression and the imperialistic doctrine of discovery: *Oh, if those folk in that land are of darker skin than I, then I have a priority over them.*

Within Mormonism, the story goes that the rebellious Lamanite tribes were cursed by God with a skin of darkness. But as the *Book of Mormon* musical points out: *in 1978, God changed his mind about black people*, referring to the real truth that in 1978, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints removed the racial restrictions about who could become a priest or participate in essential temple ceremonies. And it really wasn't until 2013 that an authoritative essay was published formally discouraging and disavowing those past theories.

Our society is still dealing with the attitudes that stem from a dualistic teaching that light is good and dark is bad. In both the United States and in Canada, there is a huge racial disparity that exists in prison populations where inmates are disproportionately non-light skinned. And we've seen on our North American news that immigration enforcement south of the border is often being initiated by the color of one's skin. Last September, their Supreme Court even ruled that that was okay. If they look like they're from somewhere else, then stop them and double check their papers. And don't think that north of 49 our society is immune to the subtle and to the overt impacts of a light-dark dualism.

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Dualistic thinking seems to have become the norm in our world. And that's no thanks to the Apostle Paul and actually no thanks even to Jesus. Jesus had his dualistic exclusivist kind of statements. In Matthew and in Luke, Jesus is quoted as saying, *The one who is not with me is against me.* You're on this side or you're on that side." Now the older version of that saying which is in Mark you know opens the circle a little bit by switching the order. In Mark it says *The one who's not against me is with me.* So the criteria is slightly different. Mark's a little more open. Unless you're overtly against me I'm going to assume you're for me. In Matthew and Luke they flipped it up and said well unless you're explicitly with me I'm going to assume you're against me. But it's still: *you're in or you're out.*

Centrist thinking and centrist even political ideologies are being pushed aside in favor of the edges. I'm sure you've noticed that. Now, I'm not trying to say that there isn't value in existing on an edge. I have been on the edges at times and I think that's the right place to be in certain circumstances. But only seeing this empty gulf between you and your equally edgy opponent at the far side is a distorted reality. And with all due respect to Plato and to scripture, the mystery of the and the wonder of God's creation is not just mind or body, flesh or spirit, light or dark, you or me. We do well to remind ourselves of this, especially when the world pretends that there's only two paths before us, this extreme or that one.

I'm grateful to Warren and the choir for singing the 23rd song today in that poetry of scripture. The shepherd feeds both the body and the soul. *I'm led to green pastures and still waters and God restores my soul.* In a way, the psalm also claims that there's no need to be afraid of the dark. *I don't need to be afraid of the dark. As long as I've got God with me, I'm good.* And the banquet guest list is diverse. There's more than enough. So, we can share everything and everyone has enough. My enemies are there. I'm there. We're all there. We're all at the same banquet - hosted by our uniting God. Now, we don't need to throw away the treasured metaphor of the calming and safe and the comforting light. But we can set aside darkness as a negative image.

Small changes send big messages. In the last full hymn that we're going to sing today, (*Joyful, Joyful, We Adore You*, sung to the Ode to Joy tune from Beethoven's ninth symphony) when Voices United was published in 1996, so what's that 30 years ago now? One word was changed in one line of the first verse. Originally in most English versions, it's: *drive the dark of doubt away.* 30 years ago, Voices United said, "Drive the gloom of doubt away." So that we wouldn't be even subconsciously drawn to the idea that the dark is bad. It's subtle, but it's significant.

Dividing the world into these distinct binaries ignores the wonderful reality of the value, not only of those edges, but of that vast middle where most of us exist. And that our goal is not to be pulled one way or the other to pick your team and empty that space in the middle.

The next hymn that we're going to sing breaks one of my intentions for this season of Lent: it actually has a hallelujah in it. You may remember that on the first Sunday of Lent, I boxed up a bunch of hallelujahs. So, there's going to be a hallelujah, but please don't let that mess up your devotion this season. I think it's a worthy exception because there is wonderful imagery in this next hymn that is all about the **joyful dark**.

#284VU Joyful is the Dark

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