

Light Where They Lived

Exodus 10: 21-23

**First Presbyterian Church
Baton Rouge, Louisiana**

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We're continuing with our Advent theme of light. But we're starting at a strange place. The LORD's people had been slaves in Egypt for four centuries. Then God raised up Moses to demand that the Pharaoh of Egypt release the LORD's people to worship him in freedom. Pharaoh, of course, refused these challenges. He liked his free Hebrew slave labor. So step by step, the LORD sent ever worse plagues upon Egypt. We pick up the story with the ninth of the plagues.

Darkness So Thick You Could Feel It



This time God promised a “darkness over the land of Egypt, a darkness to be felt.” A darkness so thick and impenetrable that it was like a substance in the air. Thick. Meaty. Heavier than Louisiana humidity in August. Have you ever been in total darkness? Perhaps in a cave when the lamps get turned out for a minute. Maybe a night far from city lights where thick clouds swallow up even the stars. You can't see your hand in front of you. There is nothing by which to orient yourself. It makes you dizzy and afraid. For three days a darkness fell so thick you could feel it.

We know about darkness falling. The sunlight of a loved one has been eclipsed by the grief of an untimely passing. We stumble, we grope, we sit down and despair that dawn will ever come. Depression smothers us with a dark night of the soul. It's a steady dark. It persists so long it becomes normal. As Psalm 88 declares, “Darkness has become my only companion.” If we could feel anything, we might feel that we love this swallowing dark that is killing us. Night falls when we make a choice that we know is wrong. But it seems to offer us life. Some freedom from tedium or entrapment. We leap into that choice, and the light in us begins to dim. The moral clarity in us gets murky. The freedom of truth becomes the enslavement of continuing deception. We swallowed a lie, and with it we drank some darkness, didn't we? A darkness so thick you could feel it—such a plague still comes.

They Did Not See One Another



So for three days, “they did not see one another, nor did anyone rise from his place for three days.” At the literal level, we get the panic of groping to find a hand in the dark. We get the loneliness of not being able to move because you can’t see your way and you don’t dare risk getting lost.

But we also get the spiritual implications of life in the darkness. “They did not see one another.” We can feel invisible. This is the plague of our technology. Young people especially feel that they are not seen. Even though they are swapping pictures and messages all day and all night. They’re not connecting. This is the plague of our busy-ness. We communicate all day long, but we also rush by each other. We don’t see each other. We don’t actually ask and listen and imagine in such a way that we know each other. This is the plague in our relationships. We talk of trivia, letting the precious moments of our brief lives be filled with nothing but distractions. We’re missing each other. In the darkness, they did not see each other.

And so no one rose from his place for three days. The people were stuck. They could not live another way but in the dark. They could not change. They could not break free from the futility, the loneliness, the fear and the hopelessness. They might well whistle in the dark to keep from panic, but for all they knew, this was the way things would always be. The plague of darkness so thick you can feel it remains with the world, even amidst our prosperity and opportunity.

Light Where They Lived



But then comes this extraordinary statement. “But all the people of Israel had light where they lived.” Can you imagine this? All through the palace it was dark. In all the homes near the city center, no one could see for the thick night. But over in the ghetto of the Hebrews, it was as bright as day. Wait. This is not how it’s supposed to work! People of means, people who matter, have back up plans. When the power goes out, we have generators. When the grid goes down, we have cash. This time, though, the lights went out in Bocage, and none of the generators would start. But over in Melrose East, the sun rose and the people had all the light they wanted. Everything is upside down.

That's one way to picture it. But again, the point is spiritual. Where the people of God lived, there was light. The darkness did not envelop them. Hope did not leave them. Loneliness did not isolate them. Though all around them was dark, God's people walked about in warm, shining day. They had light in the darkness.

Who Are You Lord?



What could that mean for us? Let's take a look at the way the Apostle Paul tells his story in Acts 26. It's definitely a story of light and dark. One day, back when Paul was still called Saul, headed up from Israel to Damascus, Syria. He carried letters authorizing him to arrest any Jew who now called Jesus of Nazareth the Messiah and Lord. The time of day was high noon, when the sun is hottest and brightest. For Saul, it was the noon time of his life. He was at the zenith of his power and authority. He was doing God's work, rooting out the blasphemous Christians. Protecting the sacred name of the LORD. This was everything he had trained for and lived for. Then came a light brighter than the noon sun in the Middle East. This was light before the sun, light beyond the sun. So bright it fried Saul's optic nerve. He fell down unable to see. In his pride, Saul had seen everything so clearly. He was sure he knew God and God's will. Now he knew nothing.

A voice spoke, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?" Shattered, Saul replied, "Who are you, Lord?" Ah, what a great place for a proud man to be. All his certainty about God had been filled with blindness to what God was really about. He had missed the point. "Who are you, Lord?" And the reply came with life-changing clarity. "I am Jesus whom you are persecuting." Wow Saul, you tried to wipe from the earth the name of Jesus of Nazareth. Turns out Jesus and the LORD I Am are one. And this Jesus has laid hold of you. He blinded your physical eyes with his light. But he opened your spiritual eyes to see him. Jesus appeared to you. He gave you such bright light to incinerate your pride and yet revive your soul. Saul had been named after the mighty warrior king of Israel. Now he would take the name "Paul," which essentially means "little man."

Jesus had a mission for Paul. A mission of light. "I am sending you to open their eyes, so that they may turn from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me" (Acts 26: 17-18). Our Exodus story tells us that where the people of God lived, there was light. Now we're seeing that God intends

this community of light to expand against the darkness. The light of God's people is the light of his saving presence. It's meant to infiltrate the plagued darkness of the world. It's meant to open blind spiritual eyes. It's meant to free people from the powers of darkness that engulf and enslave us. It's meant to take us from the lonely isolation of our darkness into the warm light of belonging to the people of God. The good news of Jesus can free us from being under the thumb of Satan to walking free with God. For there is forgiveness for the darkness we drank. There is an antidote to the poison of the rebellious, shattered world that we ingested.

Everywhere he went, Paul told his story of passing from darkness to light. But this was no mere memoir of how Paul came to self-enlightenment. How he found his truest self and got free from the expectations of others. No, Paul's story was about being taken up into a greater story. His passage from darkness to light was merely joining the journey of Jesus who descended into the deep darkness of death and forsakenness. Jesus washed the dark guilt of our sin with the blood he shed on the cross. On the third day, he rose. Jesus was the first to rise from the dead. In that rising, Jesus broke the chains of death for all who would trust in him. Paul's story would only be told as part of Jesus' story. So Jesus would be proclaiming his death and resurrection through Paul's words. Jesus would shine his light wherever his people told his story. In a darkness plagued world, the gathered people of Jesus would nevertheless have light. Light meant to be shared.

You Are the Light of the World



So let's turn this one more way, as we look afresh at Jesus' famous words in the Sermon on the Mount. Hear these words in the context of the ninth plague and in anticipation of Paul's conversion: "You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden. Nor do people light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a stand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven. (Mt. 5: 14-16).

Jesus the light of the world looked out upon a rag tag crowd of new disciples. Not many of them people of means. Not many of them influencers. Not many of them powerful. All of them new disciples. None of them quite sure what they had gotten into. Only sure that they were drawn the light of this extraordinary teacher and healer. And Jesus gave them both an identity and a mission. You are

the light of the world. You lot are going to catch fire from my torch. You are going to take that flame out into the plague darkened world and light it up. There is light where the people of God are. So you're going to expand the reach of my light by going forth.

It's essential that we understand two things. One, our distinctiveness. Two, our mission. All of humanity lives plagued with darkness. We cannot see clearly who God is. We grope and stumble and sometimes do terrible things in the dark. But God has ever been calling his people out of darkness and into his marvelous light (I Peter 2: 8). That makes us different. There is light where the people of God live. We remember what it was like to live in the dark. We remember what it was like to have light shine in that darkness. And we do not forget that we are different from the world. We may not sink back into the mire. We may wish we could just wallow in lostness and blend in. But we may not. For God does not light a flame in the world in order to hide it. We send us to carry that light to those in the dark. Out in the darkness, people do not see each other. They blow past those who are no advantage to them. They avoid the difficult and needy. But we do see. We do notice. We do care. Out in the dark, people live shallow lives and immature relationships. But in the light of Christ, we go deep with others. We rise above revenge and back-biting. We love. Out in the dark, people tell stories endlessly about themselves. But the light of Jesus has shined upon us and in us. We tell stories about what Jesus has done and is doing. So God sends us in order that people stumbling in the dark may find the freedom of forgiveness and new life. There is light where the people of God live. Dear ones, let it shine!