

<read text: 1 John 2:3-11>.

There's really no debating when it comes to the question of light being better than dark. Don't get me wrong, I enjoy a nice peaceful summer evening, and I like sleep like a person likes a good steak, but that's not really what I mean when I talk about dark. I don't mean dim, I mean dark. As in, pitch black. It's that kind of darkness that is dangerous and scary on all kinds of levels. You can't see where you are or where you are going so even if you're not haunted by irrational fears of what might come out after from the dark, then you should at least be smart enough to be afraid of what you might stumble into and hurt yourself on in your blindness. Throw into that the idea that a source of light usually indicates a source of heat as well and without that, you're talking cold and blind, eventually leading to freezing or starving.

The darkness is not a place we want to be. It's not a place we want to live. But unfortunately it is the place we are born into. It's also the place that we have no idea, on our own, that we should want to escape. And that kind of makes sense, if it's all we are born knowing, then how could we imagine it being better? What doesn't make sense though is that even when we do see the light, even when we've lived in the light for some time, we sometimes find ourselves wanting to wander or even run back into that darkness.

Like I said, at first, the darkness isn't something a person would be aware of. If we're stumbling around this way and that, occasionally banging a shin on something, well it happens, and we've never been able to see better than that anyway, so why should we expect anything better? Most of us have not actually experienced life like this, however. We were born and baptized young and we have known the life of light for as long as we can remember. Some of us have lived there. All of us have seen it in others. We may not have spent our lives in it, but we can recognize the darkness because we have seen the light. God's law is a kind of light that shows us by counter-example what the darkness is like.

The law of God tells us to love and trust and fear our God above all things, but we have seen in ourselves and in others what it's like to ignore that. We have seen those who chase after other gods. The blatant idolatry of the ancient world may be a thing of the past but that doesn't mean we've stopped worshiping other gods. People love and trust themselves more than the real God. People put their trust in other things that can't really help them. Money or other people, even things that seem noble, like family and friends. Those aren't bad things, but they also cannot save a person, so to love and trust in them *more* than God is a form of the darkness.

God also tells us to love those around us as we do ourselves, but we've seen the darkness operate here, too. Those without inhibitions act in purely selfish ways. The imagined slights and injuries to their egos cause volcanic level eruptions whereas their own actions are simply ones of casual indifference to all those around them. Almost worse than anger or hatred, it's like the other people aren't even there. And even those that try, even those of us who know the light, so often the good we do is tainted with selfish intent and motivation anyway. We do good to make ourselves feel better or to build up goodwill in others or any other reason other than simply because it is the right thing to do that our God has asked of us.

The darkness is not a good place to be. And even those of us who have seen the light already, who know the beauty and warmth of it, we still fall into it. We know that our association with the dark makes us unholy, and that by the law of God we deserve punishment. But there is a reason the real light exists, the light of our Lord Christ. His light brings healing, warmth and most of all, perception. In his light we are able to see and understand so much more about this world and this life than we ever could stumbling around in the darkness.

In his light we understand our own sin completely. We know what we have done wrong, and we understand just how wrong it is. It has shined in the darkness of our lives and shown us just who we really are. But the light does more than that. In love it wraps us up and covers us, hiding each stain and flaw. Until at last we stand in the light as though we belong there, radiant and perfect in the eyes of the one who sees us, the God and judge of our lives. He sees us as holy, light, not as the darkness we came from.

Seeing who we are now in God's eyes and understanding the darkness we came from as well as knowing what this gift cost our Lord on the cross, that all leads to the point that John is addressing in our reading today. What has happened to us as believers is a life-changing event. It is not just head knowledge that will be useful someday when we're about to pass on. Like a little passport we get because we "know about Jesus" that we can tuck away in our wallet and pull out when the time comes so we can make the trip to heaven successfully.

No, the light of Jesus reshapes who we are. To live in that light means to not choose to live in the darkness any longer. Salvation is dependent entirely upon faith in Jesus as our savior. And John points out here that a key

component of faith is obedience. Let's be perfectly clear. Obedience to God does not make us saved. Obedience to God does not earn us something new. Obedience does not create faith. Obedience is simply a natural part of having trust in God. Faith means we recognize our God's authority and superiority. Faith means then that we acknowledge a need to submit to his will because he is, in fact, above us in every way.

Faith also recognizes that this is not a "bad" kind of submitting like we see in our world or we usually think of the word. Faith understands that the will of God and the law of God is perfect and holy, and so living in the light, doing what he commands is not just what he asks of us, it is naturally in our own best interest anyway. The things in the darkness may seem much more appealing many times, but once you reach them, it always becomes obvious that it was a deception. I'm sure you don't have to think about it too hard to come up with a dozen examples of times you allow yourself to be tempted into the darkness because it promised something better and more appealing than following the light of God. How many of those times turned out better? How many of those times didn't end with yourself or someone else hurt in some way? Don't ever forget what happened the times you listened to the darkness and steel yourself against its call.

We follow the light because that is who we are now. That is both the old and new command that John speaks of here. As he wrote these words he must have been thinking of Jesus speaking to them that last time on Maundy Thursday when he told them, "A new command I give you, love one another." In a sense it is new to us, but it is not a new command. The command of love for God and love for each other is God's basic principle of creation. It has always existed. But before, in the darkness, the command only served to condemn us. We could not possibly keep it and so it stood there to highlight our failures and show us that we deserved to be punished.

Now, in the light, the command is equally serious, equally as important, but it no longer stands over us as a judge, rather it brightens our way as a helpful guide. This is not a harsh burden meant to weigh us down, it is rather a light meant to set us free from the burden of sin and selfishness. It is something we strive for not because it is demanded of us on penalty of death, but it is something we do because we understand just how great a reward it is to do it. To live and love as God intended us is a release from the pain and torment that constant sin brings on us. The greater our devotion to this "new" command, the better our lives become.

And so we strive to always push the boundaries of godly living. Not in the way people usually think of it; the idea of "how close can I come to sinning without actually doing it?" But rather in the opposite direction. How great a servant of God can I be in this life? How can I show love for him and others in everything I do? How can I increase my devotion to him today? A life lived in faith is never satisfied with the level of devotion it has to God, it always seeks to do more or better.

And that means a life lived in love. As John says here the truth of this command is seen in him (that is, Christ) and you. In your godly living, a living that comes from faith, you show yourself to be the creation God made you to be. The truth of who you are is shown its best in the light. You always seek a way to remove yourself further from the darkness and never return to it by blatant choice. Now, I don't want anyone to misunderstand this; the point is not that a sinful thought or deed automatically declares your faith dead; rather the point is that true faith will show itself in actions that strive to live in the light. We will still sin in our weakness; but it is not something we choose defiantly, it is not what we want to have happen and when it does we are not proud but humbled.

In this state of light, we also recognize the truth of the people around us. The fellow believers we know here today are fighting just as hard as we are to stay in the light every day, and they are just as susceptible to falling into the darkness. It is our responsibility to watch out for each other, not to point and laugh when they fall, and not to judge and condemn when they slip. But rather to call to repentance in love and to lift them back into the light when they stumble.

Likewise we recognize those in our lives who still live entirely in the darkness. They may regularly hurt us in their lashing out. They may offend us with their ungodly actions. But they are in the darkness with no light, how can we expect them to do any better? The good that we have comes from our trust in God, from being in the light, and no other way. Bring them the light of Jesus that they may first and foremost be saved and so that they may also know what a blessing a life lived in the light can be.

We all once lived in darkness. We've all flirted with that darkness in our lives of faith. But we each know what it means now to be in the light of God. Live your life like you belong to that light because you know what that light has done for you. Be a child of the light in everything you say and think and do. Let that light shine so others can see it. Look to the light in every part of your life, and let nothing eclipse it or get in its way. The light is your life, let your life be one of light. Amen.