When the Lights Go Out

II CORINTHIANS 4:1-6 (NRSVUE) ***Therefore, since it is by God's mercy that we are engaged in this ministry, we do not lose heart. 2We have renounced the shameful, underhanded ways; we refuse to practice cunning or to falsify God's word, but by the open statement of the truth we commend ourselves to the conscience of everyone in the sight of God. 3And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing. 4In their case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing clearly the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God. 5For we do not proclaim ourselves; we proclaim Jesus Christ as Lord and ourselves as your slaves for Jesus's sake. 6For it is the God who said, "Light will shine out of darkness," who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ.***

* * *

JOHN 1:1-5 (NRSVUE) ***In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. 2He was in the beginning with God. 3All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being 4in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. 5The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overtake it.***

The Word of God for the people of God:

Don't you hate it when the lights go out during foul weather? Why don't they ever go out when it's 72 degrees and the sun is shining? When we lived in Pine Bluff, if lightning flashed in Texarkana, our lights went out! And ice storms! Several times a year, the lights would go out. Once we were without electricity so long we had to check into a motel! We prefer having the lights on.

And yet, light is most effective in a context of darkness. A candle burning at noon on a sunny day will go unnoticed. But on a stormy night, when the lights go out, the light of that same candle beside the crib makes all the difference in the world.

The season of Epiphany is about light shining in darkness. In today's reading from II Corinthians, the darkness is about discouragement. Paul addresses people who are burned out—just sick and tired of endless meetings and confrontations with disgruntled members and confusing preachers.

But discouragement is not exclusive to overextended church members. Sometimes, when the lights go out, it's just life. Everywhere we look, it just comes at us: unrelenting; one reason after another for anxiety or frustration or discouragement.

A colleague recently shared that her daughter's school, one of the nation's top high schools, had installed a metal detection system. It's discouraging to realize that in these United States, our children need such a system in a place they should feel safe and encouraged and nurtured.

She said, "Now, let me be clear, in the absence of any other viable, cooperative solution from the cacophony of voices screaming, 'No, it's not the guns!' 'No! it's individual responsibility!' 'No, it's mental health!' 'No, it's the lack of security in schools!' I'm grateful for this system because I have a child in that school."

The first day was stressful, she said. Student traffic had to be rerouted.

Teachers were enlisted as traffic cops. Kids were late to class, confused, anxious. One teacher said it was like TSA at the airport. But worse.

Everywhere we look: …tons of rubble where families once lived, worked, and played in Gaza; Ukrainian families ripped apart by invasion; a dangerous and reckless standoff on the Rio Grande; gunshots in broad daylight in our cities; friends, family—even children—battling cancer; treasured relationships broken; dreams shattered; aging, demented, dying parents; adult children trying to find their way in the world; all this in a context that's increasingly angry, polarized, anxious, hateful—like the Titanic headed for that iceberg, too late to turn around. The lights are going out faster than we can reset the breakers.

It would be foolhardy to try to boost morale by underestimating the power of those forces causing the lights to go out. But it's equally foolhardy to underestimate—or even to deny—our ability, with God's help, to get the lights back on.

For Paul, the lights went out in Corinth. He and Timothy and Silvanus started the church. Apollos and Peter followed, with some unsettling results, Apollos confusing things over baptism, Peter saying they had to become Jews—the guys had to be circumcised—before they could become Christians.

Paul wrote several letters, parts of which make up I & II Corinthians in our New Testament. The first letter was pretty routine: some teaching, some personal greetings. They wrote back with questions. He responded.

Paul was in Ephesus, but felt the need to follow-up; so, he sent Timothy, then Titus; but fresh difficulties kept erupting: "false apostles"—probably Judaizers pushing circumcision, and apparently some of the men complied.

So, Paul finally went in person to straighten things out. It was a "painful visit"—not reported in Acts but referenced in several passages in II Corinthians. During that visit, Paul was grossly insulted and humiliated and left Corinth in defeat.

Back in Ephesus, Paul wrote what he called the "painful letter:" stern; confrontational. That letter's either lost or may be partially preserved in 2 Cor. 10–13. But Paul mentions it a couple of other times in 2 Corinthians (2 Cor. 2:3–9; 7:8–12).

Titus took the letter to Corinth; the church repented and reaffirmed its loyalty to Paul's Gospel (2 Cor. 2:6; 7:9–11). It's not clear whether it was Paul's letter, Titus's pastoral visit, or both, that initiated the reconciliation, but Titus returned and reported to Paul, and a fourth letter was sent. This is our II Corinthians, or part of it. Today's reading is part of that letter. It's full of joy, looking back over the troubles between Paul and the Corinthians that are now over[1]; the lights are back on, but the joy must be understood in contrast to the darkness.

[1] Ibid., p. 549.

The darkness of their alienation is over; ***"We have renounced the shameful, underhanded ways; we refuse to practice cunning or to falsify God's word, but by the open statement of the truth we commend ourselves to the conscience of everyone in the sight of God."***

But even in the light there are shadows: ***"…the god of this world*** (continues to blind) ***the minds of unbelievers, to keep them from seeing clearly the light of the gospel…"***

The "god of this world"—sometimes called "the satan;" the adversary—doesn't come on like a beast: horns; pitchfork. Even the serpent in the Garden of Eden is "beguiling"—charming. Who'd be tempted by a snake, except to get a hoe and kill it?

And when the satan tempted Jesus in the wilderness, he came with a Bible under his arm! And when our church had a booth at the Pride Festival recently, he came *to us* with a Bible under his arm and lies on his lips. "We just want to have a conversation," he said. And then he proceeded to jerk ***verses of*** Scripture out of context to condemn us for supporting the heinous sin of homosexuality.

Not everything in the Bible is Christlike! And the god of this world is a master of deceit who works best in darkness. And the darkness of this age—we described it earlier—is a perfect breeding ground for Bible corruption and spiritual deception.

And here's the thing: what the god of this world objects to most is the declaration of Jesus' Lordship, because it's a subversive declaration that challenges every other commitment and questions every other loyalty[2]. The god of this world is fine with Jesus as our Savior—just recite the sinner's prayer and you'll go to heaven when you die. And that's valid; but as long as Jesus is only about some other world and some other time, the god of this world is fine. The ***"gospel is veiled to those who are perishing. …the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers… (but) we proclaim Jesus Christ as Lord and ourselves as your slaves for Jesus's sake."***

More than simply a liturgical recitation of Jesus as Savior, the declaration of Jesus as Lord gets to the heart of things *in this world*: the way time and money are budgeted, the way family life is ordered, the way social and political orientations are embraced. To proclaim, "Jesus is Lord" is to move beyond the safe canopy of religious talk and to confront the deities that blind the minds of "those who are perishing;" it takes us behind preaching and liturgy to the very foundation of the Gospel.

It is precisely in the midst of life *in this world*: sometimes routine, sometimes complicated, sometimes fragile, sometimes durable, but often dark, that the light of God shines ***"…in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ."***

And that light implicates us in a serving relationship with each other and with our neighbors. It is ***"the light that shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overtake it."*** It is Epiphany.

[2] Charles Cousar, *Texts for Preaching* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993) P. 178.

Invitation to the Table

Sometimes the Lectionary gives options, and one option for today is called Transfiguration Sunday, which is a valid way to conclude the season of Epiphany.

The epistle reading is from II Corinthians: Paul talks about Moses coming down from the mountain after receiving the Ten Commandments. He had been in God's presence and absorbed some of God's glory and his face radiated or glowed. It frightened the Israelites, so Moses had to wear a veil.

When the Temple was built, a veil separated the courtyard and the Holy of Holies, where God's presence was manifested. The veil was necessary because God's presence was too much for human eyes to behold.

When Jesus died on the cross, Matthew's Gospel says the veil of the Temple was torn from top to bottom. Paul emphasizes that, while Moses had to wear a veil, in Christ the veil is removed.

Most Christian sanctuaries are built to reflect the symbolism of the Jewish Temple: the outer court, where the people gather, the inner court (represented by the chancel) where the rituals are performed by the priests, and the Holy of Holies, represented by the Table. Notice: there is no veil separating the people from the Table. The presence of God no longer is frightening; indeed, it is open and available to everyone.