

Fourth Sunday in Lent
Ephesians 2:1-10, Psalm 107, John 3:14-21
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One of the major themes in John's gospel is the contrast between light and dark. In the very beginning of this gospel, in what is called John's prologue, we hear a good deal about the light that shines in the darkness. Jesus is described as the true light that enlightens everyone.

In today's reading, John picks up this theme once more saying people loved darkness more than the light because their deeds were evil. People who do evil hate the light because it exposes their dark deeds. People who commit crimes are exposed to the light when they get caught.

Many people would say their favorite Bible verse is John 3:16: "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that all who believe in him may not perish but have eternal life." It's called the gospel in miniature, and it is a gem. My favorite, however, is from I John 1:8, 9, "If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. But if we confess our sins, God, who is faithful and just, will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness."

Both are touchstones for Lent. We need to know how great God's love is for us. Someone said, "We are loved by God for ourselves and in spite of ourselves." We also need to continue to improve our lives for God or grow in sanctification or holiness. The author of First John says we do that by confessing our faults and letting the Holy Spirit change us or cleanse us from all unrighteousness. We need to bring our own darkness into the light.

I've been interested to see and read about the official presidential portrait of Bill Clinton that shows a small, rather faint shadow of the former president on the wall. According to the artist, this was to express the shadowy aspect of his presidency, especially in regard to his affair with Monica Lewinsky.

Psychology speaks of our shadow side or dark side – that part of us we don't want to bring to the light of day. It's the part of ourselves we want to hide from others and sometimes even from ourselves. Maybe as important as the question, "Are you saved?" are the questions, "Are you really who you say you are?" and, "Are you the same person when no one is looking?"

On National Public Radio last Sunday morning, there was a segment about Brian Williams and his truth-stretching tale. A woman named Marilee Jones was interviewed about a lying incident in her life. She had applied for a job at MIT she thought she would never get because few if any women were in the Admissions Department in the late '70s. On her resume, she included a few

colleges from which she never really graduated. The school didn't check her credentials and, much to her surprise, hired her. After many years, she worked her way up to be head of admissions.

She describes having a spiritual awakening when she realized that young people were making themselves sick trying to be perfect on paper to get into MIT and other top-ranked colleges and universities. She wanted them to know they could be themselves and still get where they wanted to go.

This brought her back to her own lie those many years ago. At the same time, she started having heart issues. Her doctor said it was stress-related, but she knew it was lie-related. She said in the interview, "There was a moment where, in my office, I had a direct knowingness that I was going to die, if I didn't clear this." She went to her knees and asked God for an opportunity to fix it. The first chance she got, she came clean and resigned. She said, "And it was so great...by the time I got home that day, within one hour, my heart problems were completely gone...and they never came back."

If we live in the light and confess our sins, God will cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

This fourth Sunday in Lent is often called "Refreshment Sunday." We have reached the midpoint in this solemn season which is marked by introspection, soul searching and repentance. Much of the refreshment for me comes in today's passage from Ephesians. Listen again to these superlatives – "God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us," and "...seated with him in the heavenly places," and "...God shows the immeasurable riches of grace in kindness towards us."

The Rev. Gordon McDonald tells the true story of a night in an English pub on the Atlantic coast. A storm had driven people in so the pub was chock full. A waitress carrying a tray aloft full of glasses of ale and cups of tea and coffee was jostled accidentally and the beverages went flying. Unfortunately, most of it splattered on a newly painted wall. The proprietor heard the crash and was visibly upset to see the dark splotches and liquids running down his freshly painted wall. The crowd quieted down to see how the waitress and owner would get on. Suddenly from a corner of the pub a voice was heard to say, "If you would permit me, perhaps I can do something about that." A man stepped forward and opened a little case he was carrying with him.

Quickly the people saw that the case contained several small artist's brushes and paints. They stood aside as the man began to sketch and then paint amongst the stains. The crowd was silent as they watched the man turn a mess into a masterpiece. They were all amazed as the man signed his name in charcoal at the bottom of the wall, packed up his equipment and then left the pub.

It turns out he was one of England's greatest living artists. He had taken something that was ugly and made it beautiful.

As we look back over our lives, can't we say Christ has done that for each of us? We haven't lived perfect lives. We've been dishonest, rebellious and self-indulgent. We've made mistakes, been irresponsible and hurt people along the way. Jesus knew that about us when he lived, died and rose for us. He knows it still, but is nevertheless in the process of making something beautiful with us, if we will cooperate with him by confessing our sins and receiving the riches of his grace and favor towards us.

For, as John reminds us, "...we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life." AMEN.