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Of Darkness and the Light

John 1: 1-5; 8: 12

The question for the morning is, "Do what degree do you see yourself as a child of light?

Do what extent do you take seriously your role as a warrior against the darkness of the world?"

Do you even *see* the darkness that is encroaching upon the world in which we live?

A prominent microbiologist recently made this startling observation:

"No society before ours was ever rent by contradictions so agonizing. In both primitive and classical cultures the [traditional worldview] saw knowledge and values stemming from the same source.

For the first time in history a civilization is trying to shape itself while clinging desperately to the [traditional worldview] to justify its values, and at the same abandoning it as the source of knowledge.

[N]ineteenth century scientism saw [science as] leading infallibly upward to an empyrean noon hour for mankind, whereas what we see opening before us today is an abyss of darkness."

Do you catch the desperation in that scientist's voice?

A horrible process is taking place. He sees the world as caught in an untenable dilemma.

Virtually every culture has recognized that values and virtues are beacons that dispel the darkness of anarchy and vacuity.

Every society has admitted that these beacons of light have rooted in the eternal Light of the divine.

But here is the modern world's dilemma: it wants to banish reliance upon God, while simultaneously trying to hang on to God's values. The modern mind wants the lighthouses without the Light,

wants the beacons divorced from the Source of their illumination.

This divorce is not going to work, cannot work, which is why the prominent scientist closed with his ominous phrase: "What we see opening before us is an abyss of darkness."

Elie Wiesel noted in his recent memoir that in Auschwitz, it was the intellectuals who surrendered their values most quickly. The only exceptions to this rule were the priests and rabbis,

whose loyalty to God kept them virtuous even unto death. What a telling remembrance.

If we could be transported back a hundred years, to the start of the twentieth century, we would find ourselves placed in a grand age brimming with optimism.

Everyone was sure the advance of science and technology would create heaven on earth.

Religious faith would fade away. There would be no need for it.

Humanity would create its own paradise through the proliferation of knowledge.

Fifteen years into that new century, however, science, technology and knowledge were being geared toward the purpose of annihilating millions of people, and over the course of the twentieth century,

so-called advances resulted in the creation of weapons that threatened the very stability of our planet.

Such is the fate of knowledge divorced not only from values, but from the source of those values!

A hundred years ago the wise were sure that the concept of God would fade away.

A hundred years later we know that Dostoevsky spoke the prophetic truth when he wrote,

"Without God, *everything* is permitted."

Darkness has always afflicted the world.

John threw his brave Gospel into a world darkened by the shadow of a dominant empire.

By the time John wrote, Jerusalem and its glorious temple lay in rubble, wasted by Roman armies.

All the founding Christian leaders had been martyred on Rome's orders.

Her Caesars seemed impervious to challenge.

Christianity was a fledgling, illegal enterprise, commanding the loyalty of a statistically insignificant few.

Yet in the midst of this darkness John asserted: "In Christ is life and that life is the light of humanity.

And the Light shines in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it!"

One of our Sunday School classes is studying a book called *Why Religion Matters* by Huston Smith.

This noted professor of religion took the time to catalogue four stark differences between

the theistic and atheistic points of view.

Huston Smith sees this discussion as a fierce debate between light and darkness.

First, for the theist, "*spirit is fundamental and matter is derivative.*"

Spirit is first and foremost and matter proceeds from spirit. In the beginning was the Word.

All that is came from the Word.

For the atheist, matter is all that is. There is no Word. There is no spirit.

Second, from the theistic perspective, *human beings are the less that is derived from the more.*

We see ourselves as creatures of the Creator, emanations of the Light.

Atheism reverses the order: matter was first, and out of dumb simplicity complexity accidentally emerged.

For the believer, an Intelligence brought intelligence and consciousness into being.

For the atheist, mute matter gave rise to intelligence and consciousness through random happenstance.

Third, *the spiritual view of reality embraces a happy ending. The materialistic world-view does not.*

Christianity sees history as flowing in the direction of a glorious consummation between God and humanity.

We as Christians foresee a day when we shall understand fully and be fully understood.

We believe we shall one day know God as friend with friend, and God will be all in all!

For the atheist, the world can only end badly.

I think of poet T.S. Eliot, who, before he became a Christian, saw life as a wasteland and penned this

desperate chorus: "This is the way world ends, this is the way the world ends,

this is the way the world ends, not with a bang but a whimper."

Fourth, theists who believe that Light precedes all things, who believe that we are emanations of the Light,

believe that the more we open ourselves to that Light and allow that Light to fill us,

the more we serve that Light, the more easily we find purpose to our existence: we find ultimate meaning.

For the atheist, there is no such thing as ultimate meaning.

I think of atheistic novelist Theodore Dreiser who admitted, "Whatever man does can only prolong the struggles, worries and futile dreams of those with whom he finds himself companioned.

In short I catch no meaning from all that I have seen and pass as I came, confused and dismayed."

Over against the ennui of world-weariness, John posits a word of excitement:

"The Light shines in the darkness and the darkness cannot overcome it!"

In the secular world-view, consciousness is but a flickering light in the great dark abyss of the universe.

Ponder the implication of such a perspective. Reflect on the implications of that presumption.

It probably makes no difference if we say a chessboard is white on black or black on white, but it matters a great deal to our perspective of the world, whether we think darkness or light is creation's dominant theme.

It matters a great deal whether we think peace or war is characteristic of normalcy in human society,

it matters whether liberty or slavery is meant to characterize human existence,

it matters whether truth or falsehood is the natural order of things.

It matters whether hatred or love is the reigning force of creation.

*People complain that the news is dominated by bad news, but that is itself a compliment to the universe.*

It means we generally expect creation to work well.

We don't print good news, because we expect the universe to function in a positive fashion.

Our tacit trust in the orderliness and morality of the universe was precisely the phenomenon that first moved C. S. Lewis to question his atheism.

As he listened to people argue he would hear one person say,

"That's not your seat, I was there first." "Share a piece of orange with me," said one, "I shared with you."

Or, "You've got to keep your word, you promised that you would."

Unconsciously, all of those speakers were appealing to a universal moral ideal.

The odd thing is, the people with whom they were arguing didn't deny that there was a universal moral idea; rather they appealed to extenuating circumstances that in their opinion justified their behavior.

Both sides recognized that underlying their existence were universal moral absolutes.

Lewis was moved to try and find the Source of those absolutes. In the process he found God.

Our Lord says, "I am the Light of the world."

When I ponder those words a vivid image comes to mind.

In a couple of weeks, I'll be taking a group of young people on camping camp, and it so happens that we will be there on the occasion of mid-summer's full moon.

I have seen this scene enough times to know its enchanting beauty.

Early in the evening the great meadow is dark and lifeless, brightened only by fireflies.

Then slowly, as the moon ascends, a slanting half-light will touch the field and tinge it with effulgence.

Then the full moon breaks free of the mountain, and the entire field is lit by this dazzling radiance,

And every blade of grass comes alive. The entire field glows – glows! – before your eyes.

Christ is the moon, and we are the grass!

The notion has developed in the modern mind that God is something "supernatural," in the sense that God is foreign, intrusive, and weird. No!

God is "supernatural," but only in the sense that God is the most natural force in the universe.

God is the most natural Presence in the world, and when the Light of God's presence shines upon us, the Light illumines our capacity for faith, our capacity for courage, our capacity for goodness, our capacity for love – and we glow!

When God's Light shines upon us, all that is true within us glows with the fullness of life.

From its opening word to its closing sentence, our Holy Scriptures are about one Person.

Our Bible seeks to convey the personality of one character – God – and our relationship to that God.

You can deny the person, just as you ignore the Book,

but if you do, you ignore a profound answer to the question,

"Why is there something and not nothing?"

People say, 'Oh, I can't get into religion. I can't understand miracles.

I can't get into church, with all its hypocrites.' Such protestations miss the point.

There is but one basic question: 'Is life an accident, or is life

rooted in a divine origin, sustained by a divine spirit, shaped by a divine purpose, called to a divine destiny?

Is creation headed toward an abyss, or is creation headed toward God?

If life is moving toward an abyss, then every evil is permitted.

If life is moving toward God then every miracle is possible.

These are the metaphysical stakes.

Bear with me just a moment longer:

I will tell you how I think the fight between darkness and light will be resolved.

I do not think that the debate between atheism and theism will be decided among the intellectuals.

Ours is a pragmatic age.

The question of power of theism, the legitimacy of the power of the Light will be won by what the children of the Light are able to build.

In past centuries our forefathers of faith built great cathedrals, extraordinary monuments to their piety. The modern world will now judge us by whether we build great communities that transform and nourish.

Can we build bridges to span the great schisms within society?

Can we address the world's great inequities?

Can we dispel the world's prejudices?

Can we shine the Light upon the world's great ugliness?

Can we heal the world's great wounds?

Those are the ways the reality and power of our Light will be established or disproved.

I'm drawn to a statement the eloquent politician Mario Cuomo once made to explain his own faith:

"For some of us the awful burden of disbelief became intolerable.

The absurdity of a world without explanation was too much to live with.

Our intellects pushed us to find a rationale, an explanation, an excuse. . .

anything to take the place of despair . . something larger than ourselves to believe in. . . .

It must be a God like the one that was promised in the ancient books: a God of mercy, a God of peace, a God of hope. In the end to make any sense it must be a God of love!"

We must be children of Light who embody in our world the God of love.

We must be vessels by which that Love touches the darkness of others.

If we can do that, then we can be Lights in the darkness, and the darkness will never overcome us.

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