

“For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.” This verse, John 3:16, has been called the “Gospel in a nutshell,” the crown jewel of God’s Good News. And the letter to the church in Ephesus, our Second Lesson, gives us yet another classic verse, that gem that Martin Luther treasured: “By grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God.”

I suppose, having shared these great verses, I *could* just go sit down, and that would be enough. Who needs any more sermon than that? Well . . . *I do*, for one, whether I want to admit or not. When we read these verses in their context, they move beyond being just familiar proof texts. They shine light on the darkness, a darkness with some details to it.

When we look at John 3:14 and 15, we realize that here Jesus is predicting his death on a cross; these are the verses that link our Gospel lesson with the Old Testament reading. That passage talks about the tribes of Israel, wandering in the wilderness, complaining bitterly against the *very* God who had saved them from the mighty Egyptian army in hot pursuit, trying to haul them back into slavery. Deadly snakes descended on the people, killing many of them. Moses prayed, and God told him to put up a bronze snake, which would heal those who looked up, trusting its promise of life.

The context matters also for our Ephesians lesson, which continues after the “*by grace you have been saved*” passage. In verse 9 and 10: Salvation does *not* come because of what we do – we don’t get to heaven because God is very impressed by our diligent efforts to be good. In God’s plan, good works come as our response to God’s work for us. God gives us the impulse to act in love. That’s the light. But first we must contend with the darkness. “*And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light.*”

People loved the darkness rather than light. How can we understand this now? Here’s one connection I have found helpful. Spiritual darkness operates like an addiction. Like an addictive drug, “loving the darkness” builds a wall inside to try to avoid answering to anyone. This inner darkness takes on a secretive life of its own. The one caught up in this addiction to the dark fears being exposed to the light.

People loved the darkness, and lived *as if* there were no light. Some folks are shaped by a deeply rooted shame, locked into a feeling that, not *only* have they “*done* wrong” -- the experience of *guilt*-- but that somehow, in some deep and abiding way, they simply “*are* wrong” -- “*shame*.” They fear that this devastating inner defect must above all be hidden from view, stashed away-- in the darkness. This deeply-rooted compulsion to hide one’s shame fuels the addiction process.

12 step recovery programs modeled on Alcoholics Anonymous bring to light what had been hidden; they help to overcome the grip of the addiction. Of course, the complaining Israelites in the wilderness didn't have the 12 steps—they've been around in their current form for only about 90 years. But they could have learned from them, just as we can.

First those Israelites who were bitten by the serpents had to come to know that they were sick. This corresponds to the First Step in the 12 Steps: realizing that you are powerless to control a deadly situation. Then, in looking toward the bronze serpent in the wilderness, they had to take the risk of faith—to trust the *possibility* of healing, and to act in light of that faith. This corresponds to Steps 2 and 3, putting pride aside to reach out and risk embracing the promise of God's healing.

The next steps of the 12 get specific. In the wilderness, the murmuring people had to face an image of the beast that bit them; they had to look at that bronze snake lifted up there, the image of the very thing that was causing the sickness. For true healing to happen, we must face the specific places where we are broken.

The 12 steps then move to go on through the steps that detail the mess that "*loving the darkness*" has made in our lives and the lives of those around us. We've all had our own variations, our own false God that we deep-down trust to get us through the day and make us feel OK--it might be alcohol or opioids or other substances. But it might just as well be work, or trying to control others, or striving for success, or getting the right stuff, or perhaps the approval of others. It might be a fierce attachment to doing things "the way they have always been done." It might simply be recycling *over and over* again the stale pain of dashed hopes and dreams. In our Christian tradition, "*facing the beast that bit us*" has a name: it is called confession.

Our elaborate attempts to avoid these painful steps, well they just don't work very well. That doesn't keep us from continuing to try. When the Vietnam Memorial in Washington D.C. was first proposed, some people were against the design that called for the stark black granite wall because they said "*It was too gloomy.*" Yet, it is a place that helps thousands to finally heal—it didn't paper over the painful realities. Jesus does not present a convenient *cover-up*, as he is *lifted up* on a cross. We bathe in the light of God's eternal love, the sustaining daily grace of Easter life, *even* as we struggle daily with the darkness and mourn our losses.

On the pole in that vast wilderness between the land of slavery and the land of promise was that bronze serpent, lifted up for healing. On our pole, in our wilderness between the slavery of sin and promise of life, abundant and eternal, we encounter Christ, God's love lifted up for us on the cross. Christ is lifted up, and we are drawn to him *there* by our need for healing. Jesus is our hope, the first to be raised to life again, after that death on the cross. He shows us God's love, and together we live in its light. Easter teaches us that if there is no death to our darkness, there will be no resurrection to light and life.

And that need to “die to the darkness” is precisely what we humans resist. Let ME be in control. At least let me *imagine* that I’m in control, or that I really *ought to be able to be* in control. Don’t tell me that nothing I *do* or decide *not* to do will make me right with God. Don’t tell me that I need a “*dying Christ lifted up on the cross*” to do that. Won’t a sweet, upbeat Jesus be enough? Won’t a wise and practical Teacher of universal principles be enough? Won’t a strong Savior rushing in to quick-fix everything do it? Don’t tell me I’m hooked into *my* own darkness! Don’t tell me that when I enshrine the past and when I defend against the future, I leave no room for God’s grace in the present.

Even when the light begins to break through, we can face a new challenge. *Darkness is at least predictable.* In Egypt, the Israelites had food, and security--*of a sort*. When the difficult journey in the wilderness dragged on, the Israelites longed for the familiar security of slavery and they complained. The harsh light of God is often unwelcome. Perhaps part of the darkness is the assumption that the way things *are* is the only way that they can be. Or that the way things *were* is the way they always have to be again. Changes can threaten us, even if they might also hold new possibilities for the abundant life that God wills for us.

For us, for all people who grow weary on the journey, complaining fades when we focus on the grace-filled goodness of God in our lives. It makes a difference when we remember that we receive our life on a generous loan from God. The question can change from “why is my life so yukky?” to “why is God so generous to me?”

Marked by the sign of the cross, *in and through* us God’s love is lifted up, *the immeasurable riches of God grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus*. Ephesians reminds us that “*we are what God has made, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life.*”

The cross of Christ can lead us from the darkness of our own attempts at control and cover-up, to the brightness of a generous and joyful life together in Christ. We can trust God’s loving embrace; we can turn to Christ, confess, and be healed. In the light of that forgiven life, we can *lift high the cross*-- God’s light shining bright in our world. God’s love invites us to a life that cannot be conquered by fear or anxiety, or loss or shame or failure, or any other trial that we may encounter on our wilderness road to the Promised Land. Lord, help us to see and trust your amazing grace; bring us together in you, so that we might live each day in the abiding light of your wondrous love.