

"Light Versus Dark"
First Presbyterian Church of Kissimmee, Florida
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LORD OF THE RINGS

I know this is not Entertainment Tonight, but I must recommend a movie to you. Actually, it's a trilogy of movies, the second of which will be out this month.

It's director Peter Jackson's adaptation of J.R.R. Tolkien's Lord of the Rings.

Upon first blush you might think that this movie is just (what one movie critic called) "Harry Potter for grownups."

But, it's much more than that. The Lord of the Rings is a great mythical tale into which the author has poured Christian values.

(For those of you who may not be familiar with Tolkien, he was teacher at Oxford who became a kind of evangelist to his academic friends and was influential in the conversion of fellow professor C.S. Lewis to the Christian faith.)

Anyway, Tolkien invented a mythology of a land he called Middle Earth which correlates in many ways to events of the Bible.

Those of you who have the first in this series of movies may want to view it again and think about possible references to Christianity. And one theme that runs throughout this movie is the conflict between light and dark, good and evil. You see it in the dialogue, the characters and the way the scenes look.

SYMBOLISM

But, of course, the big question some of you may be asking is why bother? Why read or watch a tale about a mythical place in which Christian values are hidden?

Why not just tell the story straight from the Bible in a straightforward way? What's the point of all this mythical stuff?

Of course, I would concur that the Bible should take precedence in any interpretation of the faith. But, we also need to be aware that the Bible ... and especially the gospel of John is itself filled with great symbolic themes.

Now some people are put off by this word symbolism. Some people equate symbolism with something that is not true ... a "fairy tale" they might call it.

But, I would contend that the deepest truths are those that come to us through symbols and signs. Indeed, the greatest tool for opening our minds to the power and salvation of God is the power of imagination.

And today's lesson from John asks us to use our imagination in relation to one of the oldest symbols of all light versus dark ... good versus evil.

LIGHT VERSUS DARK

Imagine, John tells us, a world that is totally dark.
It is dark because the residents of this world do not understand the true nature of creation.

The God of light was there in the beginning. It was this one and only God who spoke the world into existence.

It was the light of this God which made life possible. It was God who said at the dawn of creation, "Let there be light." (Genesis 1:3)

But, the Scripture tells us, the "darkness" did not "understand" the light. (John 1:5) In this bright and beautiful world that God created, there was still much confusion. The hearts of many men and women were darkened by misunderstanding and fear.

In fact, in many cases, they did not want to understand. They preferred the darkness to the light.

DARKNESS IN THE GOSPEL

Again and again this theme reappears in John's gospel.

For example, in John 3:19-20 we read,

"And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil.
For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed."

When you read John's gospel and the other gospels, notice how many times he remarks about the fact that when this or that thing happens it is dark.

The fearful disciples are trapped by a storm on the Sea of Galilee "at night."
The Pharisee, Nicodemus comes to Jesus with his questions "at night."
The authorities arrest Jesus "at night."

And it is still "dark" when Mary Magdalene comes to the grave of Jesus to anoint his body.

Over and over again we see the symbolism. The darkness is about more than a time of day. It represents the state of human beings.

The hearts of men and women are dark.
The times they face are dark and foreboding.

HELLO DARKNESS

Of course, that's still true today.

Some of us remember that haunting melody sung by Simon and Garfunkel.
"Hello darkness, my old friend, I've come to talk with you again." That is an accurate description of the how people feel today -- they are living in darkness.

And one of the signs of this darkness is that we do not even recognize that something is wrong. We live in a society in which morality is ridiculed and sin is celebrated or covered up.

I know. Every age has its shocking music or strange trends. But, I think we are dealing with something even more challenging and sinister in our day.

All of us are bombarded with images of violence.
Graphic and disturbing language are an integral part of a whole genre of music.

IGNORING THE DARKNESS

I had a friend who said that when he was a teen-ager, he decided that when he grew up he was going to listen to the lyrics of the current music in order to understand the feelings of the younger generation.

He said that he did it for a while, but he had to quit because the message was too frightening.

Some of us, I think, have taken his approach.

We find some things so disturbing that we choose to act like they don't exist.

Or worse yet, we take the Simon and Garfunkel approach. We make darkness our "old friend." We accept what is wrong in an effort to be modern or up to date.

What we need is not the darkness. What we need is light. What we need is a voice who will proclaim a different way.

LIGHT IN THE DARKNESS

Several years ago I had the opportunity to go explore a cave with some fellow ministers. The leader of our group was an experienced "spelunker" who often took college students into caves as a part of a spiritual retreat.

Anyway, he asked us to think about the importance of light and what the Bible says about light and darkness. And then he said, "I want you to experience darkness like you have never experienced it before."

We were all wearing those hard-hats with lights on the front like miners wear, and he had us turn off our lights and just sit in the darkness for a few minutes in silence.

I must admit that those were some of the longest minutes of my life.

The darkness was overwhelming almost suffocating. And when our friend finally had us turn on our lights he used a quote from this chapter "the light shines in the darkness" (John 1:5), and Jesus said, "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life." John 8:12

Never was I so happy to hear a voice and see a light in the darkness.

ACCUSTOMED TO THE DARKNESS

Long ago when these words were first written, Israel was in the dark, the deep darkness of political oppression. Their land was occupied by the Romans, and the promises of the prophets seemed far away.

And that's why, when John came proclaiming the word of hope in the desert testifying to the light in the darkness that many didn't believe.

They had been in the darkness too long.

They had made too many compromises.

Their darkness was so deep that they did not understand the light.

They had heard the story of the coming Messiah, but they did not really expect such a light to come.

THE MESSIAH IS BACK

The New York Times ran this story several years ago. It seems that just before Christmas, a music teacher borrowed a copy of the score of Handel's Messiah from the Brooklyn Public Library. But, due to a clerical error, the transaction was not recorded.

There were several other requests for the score, and the library staff, unaware that it had been checked out, spent many hours searching in vain for it through the stacks. On the day that the music teacher returned the copy of the score that he had borrowed, the staff at the library was ecstatic.

Spontaneously and joyously they broke the silence of the library crying out, "The Messiah is here! The Messiah is back!"

The Times reported that every head in the library turned toward the voices, but "a few minutes later everyone went back to work."

Only those who had diligently looked for the score of the Messiah could appreciate its return. And only those who knew the depths of their darkness could appreciate the coming of one who was the light of God, Jesus.

NOT LOOKING FOR LIGHT

Looking back at the coming of Jesus we sometimes ask ourselves why more people didn't understand the importance of the event. After all, weren't the people steeped in the prophecies of the Hebrew Scriptures?

Didn't they remember the promise of the prophet Isaiah? Long ago the prophet had written,

"The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness -- on them light has shined." Isaiah 9:2

Why couldn't they recognize that light? Why did so many remain in darkness?

They remained in darkness because they were not looking for the Messiah. They had made their compromises with the darkness. They had learned to cooperate with the powers that be instead of searching diligently for the power from above.

And so, when the time came they were not ready.

The cry went out, "The Messiah is here. The Messiah is here." But, they only scoffed and went back to what they were doing.

They had become children of the night. They no longer believed that light could shine in the darkness. They no longer believed that a new day was possible.

Many of them were even religious leaders, but they were (as Jesus put it) "blind guides" who would inevitably lead their followers into the pit.

Those who would lead in the church must do two things.

First, they must know the light well enough to distinguish it from the darkness. Saying that black is white will not make it so.

And second, those who would lead in the church must have a hope that transcends the current situation.

HOPE

Victor Frankl in his book about the horrors of the Nazi death camp noted that some prisoners coped with the camp pretty well surviving the most inhumane treatment imaginable. But, others just wasted away and died rather quickly even though they had no discernible problems.

There was a man in the camp who was very strong. He often talked of his dream to get out of the camp and to be united with his dear wife.

But, then the man received word that his wife had died in another prison camp. And in just a couple of days, the man himself died.

Frankl thought he knew why it happened that way.

The man had died not because he didn't have enough food or water. He died because he had lost the one thing that he needed more than anything else hope.

For a long time he believed in a light shining in the darkness. He dreamed of a day when he could be reunited with his wife. But, when that hope was taken away, he wasted away in the dark confines of the prison camp.

TESTIFY TO THE LIGHT

John's job according to verse 7 was to "testify to the light." And I think that this is our job as well. We're not the light. But, are a voice testifying to the light. We may not have all the answers or at times any answers at all but still we have hope. We believe that there is more to this world than meets the eye, and that something more was definitively revealed in the man named Jesus.

When we look at the compassion and forgiveness demonstrated by Jesus, when we observe his thirst for righteousness and justice, we see more than just a good man. We see the light of the world. We see the light of life who overcomes the darkness which threatens to overwhelm us at every turn.

It is our job to testify to this light and follow the light wherever it leads.

I read a good example of what that means. An author wrote about his "wilderness" experience,

"We knew the trail back to the campground, or at least we thought we knew. We had gone up the mountain overlooking the campground, trekked through the woods up the path, in order to see the sun set over Yellowstone.

But the sun set quickly and before we were back down the mountain, it had grown dark, very dark. We reassured ourselves that if we just carefully followed the path, kept our shoes on the right way, we would be back to the campground in no time.

But, despite our best efforts, we must have taken a wrong turn. It gradually dawned on us (no pun intended!) that we were lost. What could we do in such darkness, in so unfamiliar and even hostile a terrain?

Then someone shouted, 'Look, a light!'

Down the mountain, through the trees, we could see a light, faint, it is true ... but still, it was a light. We walked toward the light and shortly we were back in the campground.

It didn't take much light to save us, to help us find our way home, but without that saving light, we couldn't have made it."

That's a parable for what Christians are trying to say during this time of year.

In all our darkness, there is a light that shines. Sometimes it might seem far away. Sometimes it might seem very faint.

But, that light shows the way back home. That light is the very life of God as seen in the life, death and resurrection of God's own Son, Jesus.

Without that light, we can't make it. Without that light, we will be forever lost in the dark.

May God help us win our battle with the darkness. May God enable us to see and recognize the light that comes anew into our hearts this Advent season.

Amen.