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John 3:13-17
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Things That Go Bump in the Night

See if the following sounds like something you were taught growing up: that being a Christian was all about where you will spend eternity after you die – kind of like purchasing a life-insurance plan for the hereafter.

And if you manage to be good enough here on earth, then when you die, you get to go to heaven and live in big mansions with Jesus and wear awesome jewels and walk streets of gold. Right?

So, even now when we hear the phrase “eternal life” it’s hard to not just think of it as only life after death.

Don’t get me wrong, it is true that to have eternal life means that death is not the final word ... that beyond the death of these human bodies is a life with God everlasting.

That’s beautiful, and yes, it is good news. But I dare say that it’s not the whole picture.

Did you know that the words “eternal life” are found 400 times in the Bible?

The word expresses the very essence of God: that God is forever, that God’s love is forever, that God rules forever, and that God lives forever.

God is not only love, but God is also the embodiment of light. And in him there is no darkness at all.

And when WE live in the light, we live in God, we live into eternal life. When WE live in darkness, the light cannot shine.

The unfortunate fact for all of us is that darkness is all around.

Do you remember that story of Moses and Pharaoh and the 10 plagues?

Thanks to Pharaoh's pride, and Moses' obedience to God, the Egyptians were inflicted with some pretty nasty-to-terrifying sets of experiences.

Even today, with all our horror shows and apocalyptic movies, these plagues can send chills up your spine when you think about them.

Water turned to blood. Swarms of frogs, gnats, flies, and locusts. Blistering boils. Dying cattle.

And, of course, the final tragedy, the death of all the first born, unless protected by a blood-painted portal so that the angel of the Lord would "pass over" your household.

But there is one plague that stands out as strange, almost benign, to our twenty-first century sensibilities. That is the plague of "darkness."

What's so bad about darkness?

Well, it's the worst plague of all, if you were an Egyptian. You see, for them light was a God. "Amun-Ra," to be exact.

According to Egyptian theology every night the sun, "Amun-Ra," died.

That word “died” was more than a metaphor. Every night Amun-Ra actually died.

And then, every morning Amun-Ra was re-born.

So . . . no daily resurrection of Amun-Ra, no life. Cuz you see, Amun-Ra was the source of light, heat, food, everything.

Amun-Ra brought the crops to harvest and dictated the annual floods of the Nile that restored the soil.

Amun-Ra brought to Egyptian culture its order, stability, and rhythm, an Egyptian culture that flourished almost unchanged for over 10,000 years.

Now, the alternative to this daily order of Amun-Ra was Chaos. A non-world. A place unknown, unpredictable, dark, and without form. A non-creation.

The forces of this Chaos lurked forever on the fringes of Egyptian culture, threatening to overwhelm and overtake order.

Chaos was kept at bay only by the power and perfect predictability of Amun-Ra.

Therefore, imagine yourself living in Egypt when Moses called down the plague of darkness.

No light switches to flick on. No street lights to show the way. As a matter-of-fact, there was no light at all.

Even their oil lamps strangely do not produce light.

Only Darkness, and deep darkness at that, even at mid-day. Even all day. Only dark. For three long days.

The blackness did not just bring with it a child's fear of "things that go bump in the night."

This impenetrable darkness meant the end of the world. Amun-Ra had died and was not being re-born.

The powers of Chaos had won. There no longer was a "world," a "creation."

The plague of darkness signaled the end of all existence, both the here and the hereafter, as the Egyptians knew and understood it.

If you were an Egyptian, could anything be more terrifying? Could any story be more destroying, more hope extinguishing, than this one?

The plague of darkness was not just something the Egyptians had to "live through."

The plague of darkness took away any reason to live, their reason for being. The plague of darkness was a plague directed not just at the body, but at the Egyptian soul as well.

That is what it means to be without light – to be without God!

Fast forward to the present. Today, at some point, most children experience a fear of the dark. Anyone here remember what you were afraid of as a kid?

[RESPONSES]

There is definitely an inborn, universal “fear of the dark.”

But God brought light. And that light was Jesus.

Which brings us to this morning’s text. Who doesn’t love John 3:16.

Who doesn’t know by heart John 3:16?

It is, most think, the most perfect encapsulation of the good news of the gospel. Martin Luther said it was the gospel in miniature.

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.

It is “good news.” But the news is not that just because of this love God gave his Son.

This news also reports that “everyone who believes in him” may enter into a new kind of life with God, called “eternal life.”

To demonstrate what this new, extraordinary relationship entails, John’s gospel immediately goes back to the competing images of “darkness” and “light.”

Those “in darkness” are not “in God.” Those who live in the light are “in God.”

A life lived according to the light, is a life lived in relationship with God.

A life lived in the dark is the opposite, not because the dark is necessarily bad or evil, but because in the dark we can forget. We forget who were created to be as sons and daughters of the living God!

We do “evil,” or morally ambiguous things “at night,” because in the darkness we can become disconnected to the rest of the relationships in our lives.

Nobody understands this moral truth quite so well as Las Vegas’ resident theologian of the tourism board, whoever the person is.

The head priest of that agency came up with a perfect 21st century rendition of the Apostle John’s discussion of dark versus light: “What happens in Vegas, stays in Vegas.”

In the city that is known for going and flowing in the dark, “What happens in Vegas, stays in Vegas” is a slogan that pretends that what happens “in the dark” does not impact our “real” life, our “relational” life.

But, we cannot pretend to be one thing in the daylight and then another in the darkness.

Ah, now notice the verse right after John 3:16. *For God sent the Son into the world, not to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through him.*

It is so simple a message, that it is often difficult to grasp. We cannot bear to admit that God loves even those whom we cannot dream of loving. Even our enemies!

But, we read: “God so loved the world ...” That means the whole world and everything that is in it.

Every rock, every tree, every blade of grass, every insect, every animal, every spiritual being, every human being and everything that is in the universe.

He knows the number of the hairs on your head. Do you?

In order to understand the enormity of this statement we have to let go of our propensity to separate the world into categories, this is good, this is bad, these people are good and these are bad.

Evidently, God does not do that since on the Cross He opened His arms and embraced everything and everyone without discrimination.

This is the key to understanding God - the fact that he loves. He loves more than one nation. He loves more than one group of people.

He loves the unlovable and the unlovely. He loves the lonely who have no one else to love them.

He loves the man who loves God and the man who never thinks of God.

He loves the woman who rests in the love of God and he loves the woman who rejects the love of God.

All are encompassed in his vast inclusive love.

It was Augustine, one of the great patron saints of the early church who said, "God loves each one of us as if there was only one of us to love."

For some of us it is easy to think of God as looking at us and waiting for us to make a mistake.

It is easy for us to believe that God is some kind of vengeful God who is going to punish us when we step out of line.

But, the tremendous thing about this Gospel in miniature is that it affirms that God loves us simply because we are his children.

A pastor relates the story of when one of the funeral homes phoned to tell him that a woman died who was not a member of a local church.

She had been listening to his worship services every Sunday on television and her husband and family wanted to know if this pastor could conduct the service.

So, he checked his calendar and saw that he did not have any appointments, and accordingly said that he would be happy to conduct the service.

He asked the family about a convenient time to meet with them and they offered to come by the church. The next day, ten members of the family show up at his office.

The husband said that he and his wife had been married for 47 years when she had a heart attack and was gone.

He was heart-broken at her sudden death and he wanted to know if God could love her even though she never joined a church.

The pastor took his hand and said, "Our God is a loving God. I can't believe that he would create a life and then allow it to be destroyed.

“I believe that God can be trusted to care for her life. Remember, Jesus said not even a sparrow falls to the ground without God’s notice.

“The promise of God is everlasting life, and I believe that we can trust his promise.” And we can live into that promise right now – today.

This is the Christian faith! This is the Gospel in miniature!

For God so loved the world, that whosoever believeth in Him, should not perish, but have everlasting life.

Live in the light.

Amen!