

2. I Am the Light of the World

John 8.12-20

Pastor Joseph E. Miller

Mason United Methodist Church

11 July 2010

Fear. At our young age, that's what we felt.

I was ten and at 5th grade camp at the William B. Umstead State Park in Raleigh, North Carolina. Oh, I had camped out in the back yard of our house with friends in Greensboro; but now we were a few hours from home and were going to be gone all week. It was a bit different now; and most of us had never been away from home for very long.

Soon after unpacking in our cabins and stowing our gear under the metal cots, the rumor we had heard was confirmed. A convict had escaped from the state prison less than eight miles from our location. With all the woods around us, we were certain that the escaped inmate would be heading our direction.

During the day we made our plans; and when the sun went down our cabin was ready. We had laced rope about five inches off the floor through the legs of all eight of our cots from the front door all the way to the fireplace. Anyone who came through that door was going to pay a serious price, because we had extra rope to tie up anyone who fell into our snare.

Late that night the inevitable happened. We heard soft steps on our cabin porch approaching the door. The latch clicked and the door creaked as it was slowly opened. With hearts beating fast we prepared ourselves for whatever was coming. Fear had turned into energy as in the moonlight we saw the shadow of a tall man walking through our door with a pipe clenched in his teeth.

It all happened fast. The man hit the ropes and then the floor with a crash as the ashes from his pipe scattered across the open space of darkness between our beds. Within a few seconds the lights came on and we were ready to jump on, pin down and tie up this intruder.

To our surprise, we saw the startled face of one of the camp's adult counselors. With many sighs of relief, we dropped our ropes and our guard. After appropriate apologies all around, we again turned out the lights for sleep which was hard in coming. Needless to say the story made the camp rounds quickly the next day; and that story was still a spine-tingler as I shared it with my cabin of boys at Lowell School's 5th grade camp four months ago at Camp Seymour out on the Key Peninsula. Though the story was told in a way not to instill fear, there was *no* furtive movement toward outdoor horseplay toward the exit door during the night (the exit was located right beside my bunk).

One of the exercises at that camp was held the first night. All students, teachers and adult chaperones were asked to leave their flashlights in their bunkhouses for a walk through the woods after the evening campfire. There was little noise as that plan was announced.

As each of the groups followed one of the Camp Seymour staff members through the woods, the stillness of the night was broken only by the sounds of twigs snapping, owls hooting, or the occasional sound of an animal through whose home the group was walking.

Fear? Likely a bit. It showed on the faces of some as all of the electric trail lights and cabin porch lights were extinguished. But if the rules were followed, and each member of the group held hands with the person in front of them, the camp staff made an hour long safe passage through the wonderful world of nature at night. Upon return there were expressions of accomplishment on the faces of the 5th graders as they proudly entered the world of electric lights again.

Fears were alleviated because there were people in charge who could be trusted. There was no need for worry about being tricked or deliberately startled. The purpose was accomplished: trust the leaders and enjoy the sounds and surroundings of creation.

Spirits were lifted and fears were gone when *light* was again present.

The stories that precede and follow this morning's text shed more *light* on the way fears can cloud one's vision.

At the beginning of John's chapter 8 is the story of a woman who had been seized by the religious leaders who claimed that she had been caught in the act of adultery. Now that seizure must have been a juicy scenario for those scribes and Pharisees involved; but they missed one key person. If the *act* of adultery was going on they had an excellent opportunity to also seize the man who was involved. Yet they only brought the *woman* to Jesus to be judged. What chauvinists!

Hoping to snag Jesus into saying something of which they could accuse him, they referenced the time-worn law of Moses when they said, "According to Moses' law, such adulterers should be stoned to death. What do you say?" The story goes that Jesus replied only with the words, "The one who is without sin among you may throw the first stone at her." Then he deliberately left their gaze when he stooped down and began to doodle in the dust.

One by one the stones began to fall to the ground from the hands of those who wanted to use them to kill this woman. The scriptures say that those who were the oldest among the group were the first ones to drop their weapons, the stones they held. The younger ones were still determined to have their way; but they, too, eventually dropped their stones and walked away. When Jesus finally stood up in the loud silence of the crowd's absence, he looked at the woman and asked, "Where are your accusers?" She replied, "They have gone." Jesus said to her, "I do not accuse or condemn you either; go and don't sin anymore."

Fear? Darkness? The woman must have felt it in spades. But where was the *real* fear?

Fear was paramount in the minds of those religious leaders. The traditionalists. At stake was their way of life, their religious traditions, their positions, salaries and retirement benefits. In their fear they trumped up a reason to lay their own fears at someone else's feet – someone who was the biggest threat to them and their way of life since the Romans took over their home area. Jesus. The person they really wanted dead was him. Eventually they would get their wish – all because of their fears and choice to continue to walk in the *darkness* of their traditions, and yes – their beliefs and faith.

It is of significant import that this story immediately precedes Jesus' soliloquy on being the *Light of the world*. It is also important to know the following story that the writer of John's gospel tells at the beginning of what we now have as chapter 9.

A man was sitting by the side of the road when Jesus and the disciples passed by. He had been blind from birth. Wanting to find some religious cause for whatever ailed a person, the disciples asked Jesus, "Who sinned to cause this man's blindness? Was it him, or was it his parents?" Jesus must have sighed before he spoke his next words to his disciples. "Neither this man nor his parents sinned, guys. He is here so that God's works can be revealed in him. As long as I am in the world, I am the *light* of the world."

What happened next would be the stuff of a great movie today. Jesus spat on the ground and worked up a small mixture of dirt and spit. Two items of matter that were totally despicable and considered unclean! But with these non-traditional items Jesus put the paste on the blind man's eyes and said to him, "Go wash in the pool of Siloam." [A name which is translated as *sent*.] He didn't say, "Go wash and come back here 'cause you won't believe what's gonna happen to ya'." Jesus just said, "Go. Wash." The man did, and he came back seeing with his own eyes for the first time in his life! Imagine that scenario. He must have made quite a few remarks to folks about what had happened as he was enroute back to find this man, Jesus, unseen – but who had healed him.

Familiar with the route he had taken, as with all of the routes through which he negotiated all his life, he came back and found Jesus. And so did a whole bunch of other curious and amazed people! Their questions revealed some of their own fears at being misread by the religious leaders: "Isn't this the guy who used to sit and beg? Well, he sort of looks like him." Finally the man with new sight and new light said, "No kidding folks, I'm the guy!" Well – that bit of verbal exchange brought out another group of people.

Who? You guessed it, the religious traditionalists and literalists who were once again foiled in their attempts to discredit this increasingly popular and self-proclaimed rabbi named Jesus. Their fears were once again at fever pitch as they arrived in their official robes and symbols of position and religious leadership. In their self-chosen darkness the questions continued for the man with new sight. With no celebration for the wonderful gift the man once blind had experienced, accusations were made that maybe he could see just a *little* bit better. They questioned the man's parents in an accusing manner until finally they said to the religious fanatics, "He's a grown man. Go ask *him* face-to-face."

After hearing more of a religiously-oriented diatribe aimed at discrediting Jesus, the man once blind declared to the whole crowd with finality, “Look, all I know is I once was blind – and now I can see!” [John 9.25] I can almost hear a modern-day P.S. put on his declaration: “You got a *problem* with that?!”

How ironic that light was available and those threatened by Jesus and his new theological moves chose to remain in darkness. How ironic it was that they finally got their wish when they accused Jesus on trumped-up charges of things like picking corn, healing people and bringing people back to life from the dead – on the *Sabbath* of all days – Jesus was finally hung on a cross to die.

Finally, they must have thought, “We’re finally in the clear. Back to our offices and rituals. We can operate in comfort now. The threat of this people-pleasing self-proclaimed Son of God is out of the picture!”

Not quite.

He’s still around. And though we might want to choose darkness rather than light, though we may make proclamations about our own self-righteousness and no need for any of this *Jesus* stuff – though we may seek some other definition for God that fits our own brains and chosen practices – choosing to stay in the shadows of darker spots until we can locate or trust something or someone that makes us feel better – we elect to live in our fears.

Thomas Kelly writes that holy obedience and simplicity go together, that simplicity is in fact the fruit of obedience. With this comes humility, a humility that rests on what Kelly calls “holy blindness, like the blindness of [the one] who looks steadily into the sun. For whenever [that person] turns [their] eyes on earth, there [they] see the sun. The God-blinded soul sees naught of self, naught of personal degradation or of personal eminence, but only the Holy Will...” (*A Testament of Devotion*, pp. 62-63). [From Demaray, Donald E. Mile Markers. Nappanee, Indiana: Evangel Publishing House, © 2007. Page 65.]

How appropriate are the words to the hymn *Give to the Winds Thy Fears* [UMH No. 129]. Like chaff to the wind, blown away [puff], fears are gone leaving only the *light*.

Give to the winds thy fears; hope and be undismayed.

God hears thy sighs and counts thy tears, God shall lift up thy head.

Through waves and clouds and storms, God gently clears the way;

wait thou God’s time; so shall this night soon end in joyous day.

Leave to God’s sovereign sway to choose and to command;

so shalt thou, wondering, own that way, how wise, how strong this hand.

Let us in life, in death, thy steadfast truth declare,

and publish with our latest breath thy love and guardian care.

Jesus said, “I am the light of the world. The one who follows me will not walk in darkness, but in the *light* of life.” [John 8.12] Amen.