



**March 26, 2006**

Preaching: Rev. Ronni Sue Verboom

Ephesians 2:1-10

John 3:14-21

## “Into the Light”

Susie was 3 yrs. old. Her new baby brother’s bassinet, all fluffy and frilled, was in the corner of the living room. Grandma and Uncle Joe and Aunt Sally had finally stopped admiring the baby to go enjoy coffee and cake in the dining room with Mommy and Daddy. Susie eyed the bassinet intently. The baby was making little snorting piggy sounds in his sleep. She quietly crept close to the baby’s bed. Peeking over the side, Susie could see his pink chubby cheeks, cheeks that her Grandma had said were the color of the roses that grew beside the porch of her house. Susie slowly and deliberately reached out her hand. She stroked the softness of the brand-new skin. She gently poked the fullness of that rounded cheek. Then she used all the force a three-year old’s thumb and finger could muster, and she squeezed. Pinched. Hard.

The baby let out a yowl that was incredibly loud for such a small creature. Susie scurried toward the sofa, trying to leap quickly behind it, to hide in the safe, dark space between it and the wall. But just as she had one leg over the back, the adults came running into the room. Five pairs of eyes stared at Susie reproachfully. The baby wailed. Susie’s cheeks were now rosy, burning with shame.

“I hate you!” she screamed. “I hate you all!” Susie raced from the room, chasing to her bedroom where she crept into the darkest corner of the closet, and sat sobbing.

The Bible reading for today, from the Gospel of John spells it out for us: We are people who love darkness, rather than light, because our deeds are evil. We hate the light and fear it, because under the beam of light, our deeds are exposed. In the apostle Paul’s writings, we find the same message. He even says that we are “DEAD in our transgressions and sins.”

Whoa. This is strong language. What about it? Are our actions really EVIL? What does it mean to be “dead” because of our wrongdoings?

As Christians we are called to embrace the truth-- even paradoxical truth. Friends, we are wonderfully made, created in God's own image- beautiful! AND we are all sinners. We go astray. As children we pinch baby brothers, we tease and torment friends and siblings. As we grow older, we learn to play on people's weaknesses, even our parents' (especially our parents!) We drop old friends for new ones that are more popular, or who bring us valued advantages. We grow up to adulthood, and still do these same things, although in more subtle ways. There is a lot of pinching, tormenting and wounding that we do to each other.

About ten years ago I had the privilege of visiting Israel. With my tour group, I visited a number of archaeological digs- excavations of ancient cities and towns. There were layers of buildings, from various time periods. People gathered together, struggled and built a life for themselves. Then another group of people swept through the area, destroying and leveling the city. Then they built over the destruction. Years passed, and it happened again, and again, and again, with new people and powers. There was no image of the "good guys" in this mess. Not Old Testament Hebrews, not Jews of Jesus's day, not Romans, not Christian Crusaders, not the Moslem Turks. No nation, no faith, was exempt from this chronicle of death and destruction. While I was there, a tragic shooting took place. A radical Jewish settler, originally from Brooklyn, shot and killed more than thirty Moslem men and boys at prayer in their local Mosque. The events of the past, revealed in the archaeological digs, no longer seemed confined to the past. And of course, today, the chronicle of violence continues with even greater bloodshed.

We sin. We are full of transgressions. Our human history is a history of transgressions. How does this make us "dead", as the apostle Paul taught?

Obviously, some sin leads to actual physical death- through crime, war, even actions taken in the name of God. But there are other forms spiritual "death" can take.

One result of wrongdoing is feelings of guilt or shame. Little Susie was flooded by these feelings after pinching her brother. We all have tasted those feelings- usually well before our second birthdays. Such feelings can cripple us, paralyze us, hold us as tightly as if we were bound, chained or buried. Guilt and shame can lead us to hide in the dark, to "hate the light". Sometimes we hide literally, like little Susie in the closet. Or we can bury ourselves in work. We can pull away from social interaction. All these ways of hiding are forms of burial. We are convinced we can only come out into the light when we are "presentable". The problem is, we will never become "presentable" hiding away in the dark, buried and isolated. We are robbed of the full, abundant life God created us to enjoy.

Another way we can be "dead in our sin", or hiding in the dark, is by pretending our sins aren't really sin. We do this a lot in our personal lives. We expound on the many and varied reasons why we were justified in a particular attitude or action. "You had it

coming!” we shout. We cling to self-righteousness, gathering darkness around us like a cloak, rather than opening ourselves to the light of God’s amazing presence and grace. It can be even HARDER for us to come into the light of truth when we get lost in this kind of darkness.

We also do this as nations, communities, races, members of religious groups. We convince ourselves that we are doing the right thing, we are justified in all we do. And we linger in darkness, not wanting light to force us into seeing too clearly.

Friends, our country is caught in a multi-layered conflict in Iraq. Recent civil violence has led to terrible bloodshed. Of course, there are many, many other regions where violence rages. All around the world, children suffer and live in fear. In Chicago neighborhoods children are shot looking out the window before school, and at birthday parties with friends and relatives. We develop ways of thinking about these tragedies, that take us off the hook of being concerned. We think, “There’s nothing I can do about any of that,” or “Sometimes there are necessary evils like war.” We think, “That doesn’t concern me. Others who are wiser will deal with that.” These ways of thinking seem perilously close to hiding in the dark, to me. God surely calls us to care about some of these things—to speak about them, and look for ways to impact them. God cares not only about the sins we have DONE, but also about the sins of leaving his good works UNDONE. All of this can represent hiding in the dark of sin.

Why do we do this? Why do we seek the dark, try to hide, both as individuals and as groups and nations? I think the answer is simple. We cannot believe anyone could accept us, let alone care about or love us, knowing and seeing what we have done and who we are. I believe this is a lifelong struggle. I’m not sure we come out into the light better as we mature through the years of our lives. I actually think we come out into the light better when we are 3, like Susie.

This is a big problem for us. We cannot be shaped by God tucked away in the dark. We cannot be cleansed, if we refuse to even acknowledge sin. We can’t be healed of our guilt and shame, if we cling to them and bury ourselves in them, the way we burrow under blankets on a cold morning.

Our culture doesn’t help us much. Somehow we are supposed to project an air of virtuousness and goodness to others. We are encouraged to protect ourselves and those we love by pretending about and covering up wrongs. This becomes a terrible burden. Hiding in the dark is awful. Fear of exposure multiplies in our hearts. But it seems even scarier to walk out into the light.

We hide, thinking we can come out ONLY WHEN we aren’t so ugly, so wicked, when we are no longer so guilty.

This presents a big problem. Because we ARE guilty of wrongdoing, and we'll never be able to come out into the light if we wait for that to pass. We'll just have to sit in the dark, becoming deader and deader with the passage of time.

What is to become of us, then? We have only one hope, given to us by the God revealed in Jesus. The good news is this: God is rich in mercy and loves us even as we sit in the dark, dead in our transgressions. This love is a gift of God to us. We do nothing to earn it. We simply receive it. "God sent his son into the world, not to condemn the world, but that the world might be SAVED."

This good news is what can turn the knob on the closet door. This good news can bring us into the light, to be washed, freed, and healed.

Brothers and sisters, healing comes only when we admit and recognize our sin, when we refuse to keep it secret any longer, when we stop pretending it doesn't exist. Healing comes as we turn to God, trusting in the divine unearned mercy and love.

We can do this in personal confession and prayer. We can do this at retreats or in classes where we share memories and stories of our lives. Some find a trusted friend or family member. Special groups provide a safe place for others, like AA, OA, AL ANON. Some spend time with a pastor. God will offer us places and people of light, where we can walk out of darkness to be cleansed and healed.

Friends, Christ calls us to expose sin. To expose sin, not to bury it. To expose sin, not to crush it. To expose sin and bring it into the light. Christ calls us to lift all sin out of darkness into the light of God's healing love.

Friends, let us pray for Christ's own Spirit to teach us how to do this. Only with his help can we ever manage it. Let's make a pact with one another to be honest about sin. Let's have the courage to face sin, never pretending sin is really just some harmless, minor snag in the fabric of life. May we grow in our trust in Jesus- Jesus who came so that we would not perish, but be given life. Full, rich, blessed, precious, savory, delicious LIFE. Life eternal. Forevermore, world without end. So may it be. Amen. Amen.