

Out of the shadows

Everything exposed to the light become visible, for everything that becomes visible is light. (Ephesians 5:8-14)

I'm quite sure the evangelist didn't mean this, but when I think of exposure, I think of cameras and film, and when I think of darkness and light, I think of film noir. Movies like *The Big Sleep* or *Night and the City*: dark stories about smoldering criminals and cynical detectives. The visual palette of those movies, many of which were in black and white, tended to be much darker than, say, a musical or a love story, with lots of shadows in which the bad guys could hide.

Often the good guys hid out in the shadows too – that's kind of the point, that all of us know a little bit about living in the shadows. In film noir most all the characters wrestle with demons, and none can seem to break out of the smoky darkness. These movies tell of worlds filled with shadows, and what lurks in the shadows can do great harm.

What hides in the shadows can hurt us. Human beings can do some dark things, and from time to time even the healthiest among us have to wrestle with the demons in our basement. Sometimes the demons win.

In fact, sometimes our worlds can seem so dark that we lose all perspective, and when we do we can lose sight of God. We stop seeing the things that are right there in front of us, hidden in plain sight. I can't tell you how many times I've felt like I was figuring something all out by myself when I had a sudden realization that God was actually there in front of me the whole time. It was as if I was in a dark place and suddenly a spotlight shone on the holiness that was there all along.

Suddenly, but not suddenly at all. Usually it wasn't until something meaningful changed *in me* that I realized that Jesus was standing right beside me. The best things in our life – the things that are holy and life giving – tend to be hidden in plain sight.

The letter to the church in Ephesus is all about darkness and light. This was a community struggling to stay true to their new faith amid a world of great temptation. The writer talks not just about Jesus, but about what it means to be new people in Christ. It was very much about identity, but it was also about behavior and transformation: the followers of Jesus were the people of the light,

and that meant that they were called not just to profess Jesus and to worship him, but to change their whole lives to reflect the light of Christ.

But there's something unique about how the writer begins talking about this: He does not say that before you were *in* darkness, or *of* darkness or *surrounded by* darkness, and now you dwell happily within the light. No, he writes that "Once you *were* darkness and now in the Lord you *are* light. You were darkness, but now through Christ you are light. You aren't just a recipient of the light. You are a source of light itself.

The writer of the letter reminds them who they are, and warns them about the seductions of the world from which they came. To be a follower of Jesus meant amending their lives, it meant real transformation of heart and mind, and if they let themselves be tempted by the "unfruitful works of darkness" then they risked falling away from the faith.

I'm glad though that there's a bit of grace in this letter because truth be told I don't always feel like light. I often feel stuck in the shadows, and I know there are some places that I worry may never see the kind of light that the we're talking about. Fortunately the letter tells us to "*try* and find out what is pleasing to the Lord." What a relief! I think that permission to try is also permission to fail every now and again. There are days when we're going to get wrong, and that is just fine.

For followers of Jesus, every day is a day of growth and discernment in becoming children of light. And when we do find yet another place of darkness, another unlit alcove what are we called to do? *Expose it*. Expose those unfruitful works of darkness. That doesn't mean we must do so aggressively or defensively. It simply means holding it up to the light: the holy act of throwing open the shades to let light in. That's all exposure means, and yet it can be powerful, healing and even prophetic.

Now, we all know that it's more fun to expose someone else's darkness than our own. That's what Twitter is for, and I suppose sometimes that needs to happen. But the reality is that like those characters in the old noir films, we all harbor places of darkness and shame and we assume that light can never touch them. Darkness isn't always bad, by the way, but the shadows can indeed hide the things that hurt us.

The fragment of an old 1st century hymn that we read this morning tells us that it was a matter of faith among the first believers that those places of darkness – of hidden gremlins and moldy basements – that even *those* places could not remain

hidden from the light of Christ. The words of the ancient hymn are *Sleepers awake! Rise from the dead, and Christ will shine on you*. It's just a tiny fragment, and we have no idea how it was sung, but in its simplicity we find a deep truth: *Sleeper, awake! Rise from the dead, and Christ will shine on you*.

We spend so much of our lives in the shadows, and we convince ourselves that our hurt is so deep that even God cannot reach it: our anger, our shame, our greed, our addiction, our self-centeredness. But there is nothing in us that cannot be healed with the light of Christ. There is absolutely nothing in us that Jesus cannot heal, but we do have to be aware and courageous enough to pull the shades. To let light in, and when the darkness is too far down for the sun to reach, to carry that light there ourselves. For as followers of Jesus we, too, are light.

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In the gospel passage it is the Blind Man, not the religious folk, who becomes light. It's the one born without sight, who hasn't learned year by year to close the eyes of his heart, who is healed by Jesus. They cannot see what is in plain sight before them; indeed when they see the fruits of Jesus' work the temple folks and man's parents all collapse into a spiral of jealousy and blame and plausible deniability. This is not what light looks like.

When the blind man was touched by Jesus he became light, and the smallness of the people around him was suddenly exposed.

Sleepers, awake! Rise from the dead, and Christ will shine on you. It's no small matter to become light, no small feat to claim the faith of Jesus and break free from the pull of the world, but light is exactly what we were created to become. To seek and share the goodness of God, to expose darkness where we find it in ourselves and in our world, to carry the light that is in us and sit beside one living in terrible darkness. We've been there, for once we too were darkness. But now we have something to share.

The Rev. Bernard J. Owens, The Fourth Sunday in Lent, Year A, March 26, 2017, St. Andrew's Episcopal Church, Greensboro, North Carolina