

Lighting up Lent
Ephesians 5:8-14

Can you recall a significant event that changed many things about you: maybe a natural disaster like a flood that swept away your house, maybe you had a car accident that left you with a limp, or a happier change when you got married? Either way, on the next day you are different and now you must start living life differently. That's how Paul begins our text. "Once you were darkness, but now in the Lord you are light. Live as children of light."

He starts off with our profoundly changed situation now that we are in Christ. He says we are light, consistent with our Lord Jesus who called himself the light of the world and said that his followers also were the light of the world. Paul calls us children of light. Light is the essence of our new family. We've been adopted into God's family, and in the ancient world, family honor drove much behavior. As God's children, we must now conduct ourselves as God would have us, so that by our light people will see and honor God. "You are light. Live as children of light."

Paul's symbolism of light illumines our text. It shines off the page to us. Light is nearly a universal symbol in world religions. If someone talked of God's Spirit searching our soul like a candle through a dark cellar, we'd understand because we instinctively think of light as God's nature. God as light makes sense deeper than reason can explain. The seasons of greater light grow our food and warm our homes. When the sun's up, we can move around freely and see where we're going. We express understanding by saying, "It was like a light bulb coming on." Darkness doesn't seem to have much productive power, except to grow mold in the refrigerator.

Paul saturates this passage with light. He's using symbolism to talk about the very center of God's nature and the nature of Christian life. When he writes in verse 14, "Therefore it is said," Bible scholars surmise that Paul lifts this line, well known to all his readers, from a baptism worship service. Paul then quotes this part of the baptism ritual: "Sleeper, awake! Rise from the dead, and Christ will shine on you." People would repeat this as a person emerges from baptism. It's about Jesus' resurrection and their experience of it as they Baptized.

Here's the way to start every day as Christ's person. Repeat to yourself, "Sleeper, awake! Rise from the dead, and Christ will shine on you." It's short enough even for adults to memorize. Christians forget our profoundly new place in God's life. We ignore the light of the Christian message. We need this good news proclaimed again, as we rise daily from our beds and as we sit every week in worship. This is Christ's life that we live in now. We see life in light of him.

"Sleeper, awake! Rise from the dead, and Christ will shine on you." We benefit by those words repeated to us, as we learn day by day to live with the risen Jesus and to follow the path he illumines in front of us. Some Christians have a hard time controlling their bad language or restraining their vicious tongues in gossip. Some Christians experience difficulty as they begin to raise the percentage of their financial giving toward a tenth and then to giving more. Some have difficulty reining in their anger. Others struggle against sexual lust. For many Christians it's a hard step in faith to look beyond their nation's interests and their group's prejudices and to embrace the entire world as God's good creation rather than to fear it. God is more than an American and God cares about more than America and its allies.

We need to turn to God for the power to stop our destructive habits and to allow God to open us to more and more of God's blessings in this good world. In Lent, we get into the habit of inviting and urging each other to advance further into the light and life of Christ: "Sleeper, awake! Rise from the dead, and Christ will shine on you."

At times life must shout to us our need of Christ's light in our lives. We might spend our days sleepwalking until we're struck by events that truly wake us up and make us search for light to walk by. We get thumped awake by the birth of a child, or a divorce, seeing a homeless person on our doorstep, or experiencing the death of a loved one, encountering addiction or mental illness, being mugged, or having our nation attacked. If nothing else, such occurrences startle us awake. They also let us know that we must do things differently today than yesterday because life is different now. We're different. When the discovery was confirmed that women who painted watch dials with radium died much younger than others, the process was stopped. For the sake of the people involved, the procedures had to be changed. It took a long time to change it, but it had to be done. Industry had to change its procedures for the health of all

involved. So, with us. Within the spiritual realm, God's presence pushes and pulls us to different attitudes and behaviors, and God directs and regulates our conduct through Jesus' moral light.

Our Christian task expands even beyond merely living morally well or even fleeing evil. Paul says we must expose the works of darkness. We must expose the world's evil and that includes holding ourselves open to others, both our good and our bad. Christians are those who acknowledge our sins. We admit and expose who we are and what we've done. We're on display as Jesus' people. Jesus said, "Let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven." Sometimes Christians forget that we are to acknowledge the good about ourselves as well as the bad. If you only do one of those two, you won't be as healthy a partner with God. Paul writes, "Everything exposed by the light becomes visible, for everything that becomes visible is light."

A way to apply Paul's message is the concept of personal transparency. In 1935, Bill Wilson, known for years only as "Bill W," started Alcoholics Anonymous. Honesty about self is central to the approach of the organization, and the principles of AA have been applied to many other recovery programs. The necessity of telling the truth about ourselves — personal transparency — proves to be not only morally correct but a healing and healthy practice.

Certainly, the apostle Paul instructs the Ephesians likewise: be what you are. "You are light. Live as children of light." He's not talking about spiritual exhibitionism where some Christians get into a bragging contest, "I was a worse sinner than you were." We're the better for admitting our strengths as well as our sins, and those who live with us benefit from our doing so, too.

Paul says we must strain and even labor to learn how to live for God. Verse 10: "Try to find out what is pleasing to the Lord." By our trusting Jesus' resurrection, God has made us similar to Jesus. It's not the other way around. We don't reduce Jesus to our image. He expands us to his. Our task and gift is to discover what God wants of us, instead of our continually trying to get what we want from God. We must strive to show our family resemblance to God.

When Paul writes, "try to find out what is pleasing to the Lord," the verb, "to find out" in this context can mean, "to find out by experience." You might begin by asking yourself who has shined in your life as a Christian. Then consider, as you reflect upon your experience, if that guides how you are now able to shine in this world for others.

"Try to find out what is pleasing to the Lord." That sentence is a working (in fact, laboring) definition of Lent. "Try to find out what is pleasing to the Lord." Lent doesn't mean stop eating chocolate or stop watching movies. It means establish the habits you'll follow forever. Concentrate on God. Don't get sidetracked by thinking about what you can give up in order to barely get by. Here and now — here in worship, now in Lent — can we be honest and ask how much are we pleasing God? How much are we trying to just please ourselves? Let God enlighten your thinking. Allow the Holy Spirit to expose your sins against God and your aspirations for God. God can use them both, and our admitting both is a healing and healthy practice.

"Sleeper, awake. Rise from the dead, and Christ will shine on you." The Holy Spirit polishes your life to reflect Jesus' light. Wherever you are and whatever you are doing, your main task for God is to find ways to let God's light shine from you.

We'll never on this earth learn enough about God, study the Bible as we might. We won't understand perfectly what God would have us do. Yet, despite the circumstances around us, we are light, nonetheless, not for ourselves but for others. That also is a summary of Lent. Let us grasp the joy and shoulder the task of our Christian life. "Sleeper, awake! Rise from the dead, and Christ will shine on you." Amen.