

Sunday November 16th 2014

Readings

Zephaniah 1:7, 12-18

12 At that time I will search Jerusalem with lamps, and I will punish the people who rest complacently on their dregs, those who say in their hearts, "The Lord will not do good, nor will he do harm." **13** Their wealth shall be plundered, and their houses laid waste. Though they build houses, they shall not inhabit them; though they plant vineyards, they shall not drink wine from them. **14** The great day of the Lord is near, near and hastening fast; the sound of the day of the Lord is bitter, the warrior cries aloud there. **15** That day will be a day of wrath, a day of distress and anguish, a day of ruin and devastation, a day of darkness and gloom, a day of clouds and thick darkness, **16** a day of trumpet blast and battle cry against the fortified cities and against the lofty battlements. **17** I will bring such distress upon people that they shall walk like the blind; because they have sinned against the Lord, their blood shall be poured out like dust, and their flesh like dung. **18** Neither their silver nor their gold will be able to save them on the day of the Lord's wrath; in the fire of his passion the whole earth shall be consumed; for a full, a terrible end he will make of all the inhabitants of the earth.

Psalm 90:1-12

1 Lord, you have been our dwelling place in all generations. **2** Before the mountains were brought forth, or ever you had formed the earth and the world, from everlasting to everlasting you are God. **3** You turn us back to dust, and say, "Turn back, you mortals." **4** For a thousand years in your sight are like yesterday when it is past, or like a watch in the night. **5** You sweep them away; they are like a dream, like grass that is renewed in the morning; **6** in the morning it flourishes and is renewed; in the evening it fades and withers. **7** For we are consumed by your anger; by your wrath we are overwhelmed. **8** You have set our iniquities before you, our secret sins in the light of your countenance. **9** For all our days pass away under your wrath; our years come to an end like a sigh. **10** The days of our life are seventy years, or perhaps eighty, if we are strong; even then their span is only toil and trouble; they are soon gone, and we fly away. **11** Who considers the power of your anger? Your wrath is as great as the fear that is due you. **12** So teach us to count our days that we may gain a wise heart.

1 Thessalonians 5:1-11

1 Now concerning the times and the seasons, brothers and sisters, you do not need to have anything written to you. **2** For you yourselves know very well that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night. **3** When they say, "There is peace and security," then sudden destruction will come upon them, as labor pains come upon a pregnant woman, and there will be no escape! **4** But you, beloved, are not in darkness, for that day to surprise you like a thief; **5** for you are all children of light and children of the day; we are not of the night or of darkness. **6** So then let us not fall asleep as others do, but let us keep awake and be sober; **7** for those who sleep sleep at night, and those who are drunk get drunk at night. **8** But since we belong to

the day, let us be sober, and put on the breastplate of faith and love, and for a helmet the hope of salvation. 9 For God has destined us not for wrath but for obtaining salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, 10 who died for us, so that whether we are awake or asleep we may live with him. 11 Therefore encourage one another and build up each other, as indeed you are doing.

Matthew 25:1-12

14 "For it is as if a man, going on a journey, summoned his slaves and entrusted his property to them; **15** to one he gave five talents, to another two, to another one, to each according to his ability. Then he went away. **16** The one who had received the five talents went off at once and traded with them, and made five more talents. **17** In the same way, the one who had the two talents made two more talents. **18** But the one who had received the one talent went off and dug a hole in the ground and hid his master's money. **19** After a long time the master of those slaves came and settled accounts with them. **20** Then the one who had received the five talents came forward, bringing five more talents, saying, "Master, you handed over to me five talents; see, I have made five more talents." **21** His master said to him, "Well done, good and trustworthy slave; you have been trustworthy in a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master." **22** And the one with the two talents also came forward, saying, "Master, you handed over to me two talents; see, I have made two more talents." **23** His master said to him, "Well done, good and trustworthy slave; you have been trustworthy in a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master." **24** Then the one who had received the one talent also came forward, saying, "Master, I knew that you were a harsh man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you did not scatter seed; **25** so I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground. Here you have what is yours." **26** But his master replied, "You wicked and lazy slave! You knew, did you, that I reap where I did not sow, and gather where I did not scatter? **27** Then you ought to have invested my money with the bankers, and on my return I would have received what was my own with interest. **28** So take the talent from him, and give it to the one with the ten talents. **29** For to all those who have, more will be given, and they will have an abundance; but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away. **30** As for this worthless slave, throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth."

Sermon

Grace to you and peace from God our Father,
God's Son our Lord Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit:
Amen.

The last few weeks have been chock full of imagery about darkness and light. Last week, Amos told us that the day of the Lord is darkness, not light, a phrase that surely conjures confusion and inspires inquiry. This week, Paul in 1 Thessalonians tells us that we are children of light, that we are people of the day. What is this obsession with light? What is the darkness all about?

Light is an astonishing thing. Physicists will tell you that it is unique because in some ways, it acts like a wave, and in other ways, it acts like a particle. Now,

I'm not smart enough to be a physicist, so I don't really know what that those words mean, except that light is an incredible element of creation. It lives in two worlds and yet is not fully defined by either. And today we hear that we are children of this light.

Think about the power of light. Without light, we would be entirely without our sense of sight. Our eyes are totally dependent upon light in order to see the world in which we live. Eyes without light are literally blind, and so light offers the profound blessing that is taking in the beauty of creation and learning to navigate around the obstacles and the evils in our current world. And today we hear that we are children of this light.

Light even comes with a capacity to warm, something we deeply appreciate as these colder days set in. Each morning when I get to my office, I turn on the boiler, but long before that heat comes up to speed, I am thankful for the lamps and candles in my office which not only enlighten the desk but warm the space. As we've all learned after falling asleep in the shade, long before we see the light, we can feel the light. And today we hear that we are children of this light.

And darkness? Well, darkness itself isn't even a thing. It's just the absence of light. The lack of light leads to darkness. Darkness is like the dead battery or the empty lighter. Darkness isn't a power, it's just powerless. It's got no fuel. It's emptiness. Nothingness.

Consider when Amos called the day of the Lord darkness. Amos is speaking about those who ignore the presence of God, who choose darkness rather than God's illumination, rather than the brightness of God's presence. Without the light, how can we know which way to turn? How can we know what goodness is if we can't see anything in the first place? For anyone who chooses life apart from the light of God, darkness rules the day.

That's part of what makes this Thessalonians passage incredible. Paul talks about the children of darkness as those who are in a deep sleep or, even worse, drunk as a skunk. And who knew skunks drank, anyway? But I digress. Many people look at this reference to drunkenness and assume that we're

making a sort of condemnation of the darkness and the people who live in darkness, that the point of Thessalonians is to create insiders of light and outsiders of darkness. But notice what Scripture doing here. The writer is using sleep and drunkenness as imagery for what life is like without light. This isn't condemnation, it's compassion.

Life without the light of God is an eternal sleep, absent of dreams. Life without the light of God is perpetual drunkenness, with the world distorted such that you can't see straight. This is not a condemnation of darkness, but an honest assessment of what life is like without Christ. Confusing. Lonely. But where is the compassion within the midst of this?

Advent is closing in and we must remember: We were the people who lived in darkness and have now seen a great light. We were the sleepers who are now awakened. We were those, once intoxicated by the world, now livened up by the presence of the living God. As children of the light, we must remember that we have not always been this way. Someone brought us the light in our darkness.

And if we are honest as children of the light, then we must recognize that we still live in two worlds. We are at the same time sinners and saints. Like the particles and waves of light, we appear as two things. Though our sin no longer defines us, our sainthood has not yet been fully realized. Fortunately,

God accepts us as children of light, God embraces us as saints, even as we live in this transitory space from darkness into light.

But with that identity, we are also in a unique position to become light bringers to the darkness. If we are children of light, then we may shine brightly and help to open eyes once clouded by darkness. We may help empower them from the limitations of the surrounding shadows, and instead help people to see the ways in which God is actively involved in the world today.

And not only see! Like a fire that emits light and warmth into the coldest of nights, we as children of the light might help others not only see the potential of the Kingdom of God, but actually provide

tangible, physical effects of that kingdom at work. To be children of the light is to be littler lights that point to the Great Light that is Jesus Christ.

So to be children of the light, then, is not to condemn those in darkness, but to have compassion upon those still overwhelmed by shadows. For those still stuck in sleep, still intoxicated by the world's false lights that distort the truth and justice inherent to the Kingdom, we bring the kind of light that breaks through the blinds, the kind of coffee and cold shower that rouses us to an awareness of the world as it truly is: created by God, redeemed by God, loved by God, children of God.

As children of light, then, what are our acts of compassion? Or, to stick with the metaphor, how

does our compassion shine? How does our
compassion light up the world?

I spent most of my day yesterday seeing this light through a ministry called Salvage Garden. The premise of this ministry is simple: all people, despite our vast differences, are created by God as people of sacred worth. This might sound like a no brainer, but yesterday I heard numerous people relay stories about being asked to leave church because their differently abled family members were deemed too much of a distraction. I heard stories about people being asked to keep mental illness needs off of the prayer list because the congregation couldn't handle it.

So let's be clear about this: refusing someone entrance to worship because their presence is inconvenient for us is living in the darkness. Refusing to pray for a person or publicize their need for prayer because that need makes us uncomfortable is living in darkness.

But Salvage Garden grew as a safe place for people of all abilities to come and worship together using all of our senses and whatever abilities we bring. And let me tell you: it is so beautiful! A time when everyone is invited to worship at their own pace, when the sounds of tapping or sudden outbursts are not seen as a problem but as the culmination of the Psalmist's joyful noise. The goal of this conference was to promote accessible,

hospitable communities for people with disabilities and special needs. That's light! To become a place that includes those otherwise cast out by our culture is to shine bright as children of the light.

And we at CLC could offer that here in the NRV. Through one of our college students, we've got some initial contacts into the Special Education Department at RU. Another our students' parents' is an occupational therapist, and the student herself is a special Olympian. You might notice we've got another special Olympian here in our midst today! Our family has already begun this process of welcoming and celebrating people with different abilities. We've already flipped the switch to lighten

up the room. But how might we flip the floodlight so that this light becomes a beacon in the NRV?

What if we use our new space upstairs and our new relationships with RU to offer a monthly worship service like Salvage Garden? We can help families from Pulaski to Blacksburg stay connected to their churches on Sunday mornings, but also have a Sunday evening event that allows people of all abilities to connect with God on their own level? An event built upon the premise that we are all children of light? Melissa Guthrie, the founder of Salvage Garden, has offered to consult with us in this process, and the Director of Lutheran Social Services in Virginia will be here tomorrow to talk with us about this potential. Next year, we will try this out as a new

ministry not only to those in our community but for the whole NRV, to leverage our talents as children of light, to bring light into darkness.

This is one way we can live the Gospel as children of light, and there are a myriad of others, but at all times we are called to leverage our talents to become a place that is fully inclusive of all people and celebrates the integrity of all, regardless of our abilities. This is hard work, but thank God, it is good work. Amen.