

The Fourth Sunday of Lent

(Year A)

<i>First Reading</i>	1 Samuel 16:1B, 6-7, 10-13A
<i>Response</i>	The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want
<i>Psalm</i>	Psalm 23:1-3A, 3B-4, 5, 6
<i>Second Reading</i>	Ephesians 5:8-14
<i>Gospel Acclamation</i>	I am the light of the world; he who follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.
<i>Gospel</i>	John 9:1-41

The fourth Sunday of Lent for year A brings us to another passage from the Pauline letters, and this one's from the letter to the Ephesians. And the Gospel for today is the famous story of the man born blind, who Jesus gives the ability to see. So the Church here has selected a text from St. Paul that's focused on the theme of light and darkness, and the importance of walking in the light of Christ. So let's read the text together, and then we'll try to unpack it. Ephesians 5:8-14...Paul writes:

...once you were darkness, but now you are light in the Lord; walk as children of light (for the fruit of light is found in all that is good and right and true), and try to learn what is pleasing to the Lord. Take no part in the unfruitful works of darkness, but instead expose them. For it is a shame even to speak of the things that they do in secret; but when anything is exposed by the light it becomes visible, for anything that becomes visible is light.

Therefore it is said,

“Awake, O sleeper, and arise from the dead,
and Christ shall give you light.”¹

Okay, a lot going on here in this passage. The first thing that you'll notice about this text is the contrast between light and darkness here. Now obviously, in context,

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, all Bible citations/quotations herein are from *The Holy Bible: Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition*. New York: National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA, 1994.

Paul is not talking about natural light and natural darkness. He's talking about spiritual light and spiritual darkness. And you can see here that he's describing this when he says:

...walk as children of light (for the fruit of light is found in all that is good and right and true)...(Ephesians 5:8b-9)

So here he's using spiritual and moral categories—rather than natural categories—to describe the kind of life that disciples of Jesus (believers in Jesus) are supposed to live.

Now, when Paul says “walk in the light” or “walk as children of light,” that's a very Jewish way of speaking. If you go back to the Old Testament and you look at Jewish literature from the time of Jesus, the language of walking is a very common metaphor for what we would call morality. In fact, in Jewish tradition, in the rabbinic tradition, all of the moral and legal teaching that would be gathered together—the very sayings of the rabbis on moral and legal matters—what was known as *halakhah*. And it's from the Hebrew word *hala*, which literally means to walk. So *halakhah*...I mean, you could call it law or legal teaching, but it literally means (so to speak) “how to walk.” So the metaphor for walking is a metaphor for how you live your life.

And this goes all the way back to the Old Testament. Paul here is actually alluding to—in a sense, very lightly, but he is—Psalm 1. Because if you go back and look at Psalm 1, both terms Paul uses—the image of walking and also the image of fruit—are taken from the very first psalm of arguably the most well known and famous book in the Old Testament for Jewish people, which was the book of Psalms. This was the prayer book of Jesus, the prayer book of the Jewish people, the prayer book of rabbis like Paul. So everyone knew the Psalter, and in particular, they would all know the first psalm.

So when Paul talks about “walking as children of light” and talks about “the fruit of light”—which by the way, is a mixed metaphor. We don't usually think of light as bearing fruit. A tree would bear fruit. A light might give warmth. So Paul mixes his metaphors, which is okay. He does it all the time. But both of those images are

actually coming from Psalm 1. So with Paul's words in mind, go back and read the psalm. Listen to these words, and this will give you an idea of what he means by "walk as children of light." This is Psalm 1:

Blessed is the man
who walks not in the counsel of the wicked,
nor stands in the way of sinners,
nor sits in the seat of scoffers;
but his delight is in the law of the Lord,
and on his law he meditates day and night.
He is like a tree
planted by streams of water,
that yields its fruit in its season,
and its leaf does not wither.
In all that he does, he prospers.

The wicked are not so,
but are like chaff which the wind drives away.
Therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgment,
nor sinners in the congregation of the righteous;
for the Lord knows the way of the righteous,
but the way of the wicked will perish. (Psalm 1:1-6)

Okay, so what is this psalm doing? It's using the image of two paths or two ways that you can walk on. There's the way of the righteous man, who walks the path of righteousness. He meditates on God's law day and night. He obeys the law of the Lord, and as a result, he bears the fruit of righteousness. He performs works that are good and true. And like a tree that is planted near water, he bears its fruit in its season.

The other way or the other path that you can walk on is the pathway of the wicked. And the wicked person—unlike the righteous man—doesn't bear any fruit. He's like dead, dry chaff. He's not going to stand in the court of God's judgment, but his way—his path—is going to perish.

So using that kind of standard Jewish way of describing the moral life...which, by the way, is a really good way for thinking about morality. We tend to think of morality as, “Okay, here’s this set of rules. Do I violate the rules or do I keep the rules?” You know, kind of like a checklist, whereas the Jewish image of walking helps us realize, if you’re going to take a path, if you’re going to take a step, every step you take has a choice involved. There’s movement to it. There’s free will involved. You’re either moving toward God or you’re moving away from Him. So just the image of walking is a very apt metaphor for the moral life of a person, because we’re always...just like walking, you’re constantly taking steps. In the moral life, we’re always making choices. So the question is, okay, there are two paths you can go on. Which one are you going to walk on—the way of the righteous or the way of the wicked?

So drawing on that Jewish rabbinic language and imagery, Paul is speaking to the Ephesians, who used to be pagans but now they’ve become Christians—or to use Paul’s language, they have become saints. They’ve become members of the Body of Christ. And so Paul says to them, look:

...once you were in darkness...

(i.e. before you believed, before you were baptized)

...but now you are light in the Lord...

That’s Paul’s language. He always talks about being in Christ. That’s his favorite way for describing what it means, as we would call it, to be a Christian—is to be “in Christ.” So once you’ve been baptized, you become...you’ve been baptized into Christ, so he says:

...you are light in the Lord; walk as children of light...

In other words, live like you are members of Jesus’ Body. If Jesus is the light of the world, then live as if you are children of light. And he says:

...(for the fruit of light is found in all that is good and right and true)...
(Ephesians 5:9)

So what kind of lives should we be leading? How should we walk? In such a way that we bear the fruit of goodness and truth and justice. Notice what he says here:

...try to learn what is pleasing to the Lord. (Ephesians 5:10)

I love that statement. Try to learn what is pleasing to the Lord. Notice, Paul recognizes that for his Ephesian converts, that this is going to take some effort on their part. They're going to have to try. They're going to have to study. They're going to have to be like the man in Psalm 1 who actually picks up the law of the Lord and studies it and reads it day and night.

So I just bring this up because people are so often looking for guidance. "How do I live a Christian life? What am I supposed to do? What kind of choices should I make?" Well, here's a tip. How about you read the Bible? Start reading the Bible.

Now if you're watching these videos, you're probably already reading the Bible. But there are lots of people out there who don't realize that in order to walk on the right path, we need to do what Psalm 1 says and what Paul says here—learn. We need to learn what is pleasing to the Lord. The Ephesians that Paul is speaking to here...they didn't necessarily know what was good and what was bad. They had basic moral compass, but in paganism, there were some things that Roman society and pagan society accepted, like slavery and the abuse of children and the abuse of women and other things...idolatry, those kinds of things which were regarded as good or at least morally neutral, but which are in fact wrong. So to learn what is pleasing to the Lord implies that if you're going to walk this path, you need to study...you need to learn just like the man in the psalm, the righteous man in the psalm.

And then the other thing you have to do is not just study what is good. You have to avoid what is evil. So Paul says to them:

Take no part in the unfruitful works of darkness, but instead expose them.
(Ephesians 5:11)

So notice, just like the wicked man in the psalm, the chaff doesn't bear any fruits. It's just a husk. So too, those who engage in wickedness today, Paul is saying, their works are unfruitful and you should have no part in them. You need to turn away from them. In fact, he goes on to say:

...it is a shame even to speak of the things that they do in secret...(Ephesians 5:12)

So here Paul seems to be referring in particular either to sexual immorality—which would be obviously performed in secret or in private—or also idolatry, that would be performed in temples and that kind of stuff, in hidden rites. But in either case, Paul says it's shameful even to speak of what they do in secret, because:

...when anything is exposed by the light it becomes visible, for anything that becomes visible is light. (Ephesians 5:13)

Now, notice the bar Paul sets here. It's pretty high, isn't it? Not only should you as Christians not do what the pagans are doing...not only should you avoid the immorality they're engaged in, you shouldn't even talk about it. You shouldn't even speak about it. It's shameful to speak about the things that they do in secret. It's a powerful and important point and hopefully a challenging one as well. In other words, what kind of language should Christians, who are supposed to be the light of the world, be utilizing? Well, Paul actually says...he tells us explicitly in Ephesians 5:3. If you back up just a few verses before the reading for today in Ephesians 5, listen to this...Paul says:

...Immorality or any impurity or greed must not even be mentioned among you, as is fitting among holy ones, no obscenity or silly or suggestive talk, which is out of place, but instead, thanksgiving.

In Greek, *eucharistia*. That's Ephesians 5:3-4. That's the New American Bible. It's a little more explicit there, no pun intended, about the language being utilized. So

notice what Paul says. In context, when he says you shouldn't even talk about the things they do in secret, you can just back up a few verses and see what he's referring to. He's talking about sexual immorality, impurity, greed, obscenity... suggestive, filthy, silly talk. None of that stuff—which would have a place in their life as pagans—has any place in their life as Christians.

In particular, I'd highlight there Ephesians 5:4: no obscenity should come out of your mouth. That should be a challenge to Christians. It's not clear to me why the idea of profanity and obscenity has become widely accepted in many Christian circles—not all Christian circles but in some, certainly in some Catholic circles—when the Bible is quite clear about the fact that that kind of language is unfitting of a Christian, precisely because...what does Paul say? It's not fitting to be mentioned among you because you are saints. The Greek word there is *hagios*.

I've talked about this before....Paul never uses the term Christian to refer to followers and believers of Jesus. Not that it's a bad term. It's used in Acts. But Paul himself doesn't use it. His favorite term to describe believers and those who are in Christ is *hagios*—“holy ones,” literally “saints.” Because once you've been set apart from the world to become a member of the Body of Christ, then that kind of language and those kinds of activities that you used to engage in when you were pagan have no place among you. You're a member of the mystical Body of Christ. You need to live like Christ lives. You're supposed to be light to the world. You need to actually shine light and not let the words that come out of your mouth bring darkness to the world.

He says if you want to talk about anything, what should you talk about? *Eucharistia* is the Greek word—“thanksgiving.” In other words, let your mouth resound to the praise of God, not to obscenity and suggestive talk and pornographic speech and indecency and impurity. Paul says those things shouldn't even be mentioned by you. They shouldn't be the topic of discussion, because the things that they do in dark are shameful. And when they are exposed to the light, then they become visible. Powerful challenge here Paul is laying before the feet of the Ephesians...and of course before us as well. And then he says:

Therefore it is said, “Awake, O sleeper, and arise from the dead, and Christ shall give you light.”

So here Paul ends with the image of the resurrection as a waking from sleep. And if you think about that, although in our day and time, we have electric lights in the home. For Paul, when you would awake from sleep would normally be shortly before or around the time of sunrise, at the dawn. So the image of awaking from sleep would be one that would be associated with welcoming the dawning light of the day, which Paul says is Christ Himself, who has risen from the dead.

So he’s using a series of beautiful and powerful images here to describe the fact that now that the Ephesians are in Christ, they have to walk in the light. They have to be light. They have to live as children of the light, and they have to bear the fruits of the light. And in all four of those cases, the light is none other than Christ Himself. It’s the person of Christ, especially the person of the risen Christ, who of course springs from the darkness and depth of the tomb at dawn on Easter Sunday.

So in closing, two things. First, why does the Church choose this passage from St. Paul for today? Well, one thing, Lent is a time for us to call to mind our sins and to change our lives. So if we’ve strayed from the path of the light, we need to get back on track.

Secondly, it’s also an image that links up with the Gospel for today. So the man born blind, although he is in a state of physical blindness which Jesus heals, ultimately the meaning of that miracle that Jesus is going to make clear at the end of the Gospel is...it’s not really about physical blindness and physical light. It’s about those who are spiritually blind and who don’t see the light of who Jesus is and who Christ is.

So what Christ has done is come into the world not to shed natural light but the supernatural light of God’s grace that would reveal to us who exactly He is and who He’s called us to be in Christ.

So I’ll close with a quote from the living tradition is here. This is from St. Thomas Aquinas again—great doctor of the Church who composed commentaries on all of

the letters of Paul. And this is what he has to say about this passage from the letter to the Ephesians:

Thus he remarks that “you were heretofore darkness” blinded by ignorance and error: “having their understanding darkened” (Eph 4:18). “They have not known nor have they understood; they walk in darkness” (Ps 82:50). The darkness also comes from sin: “the way of the wicked is darksome; they know not where they fall” (Prov 4:19). ... [W]hen sin dominates a man the entire person is referred to as sin and darkness. Next, as “but now light,” he describes their present condition, as though he said: but now you enjoy the light of faith: “among whom you shine as lights in the world” (Phil 2:15), for “you are the light of the world” (Matt 5:14).²

That’s Aquinas’ *Commentary on Ephesians*, paragraph 286 and 287. Now it’s kind of complicated the way his sentence structures might seem a little off putting. But he says a couple of really important things here. First, notice what he says...that sin leads to ignorance and error, and that this ignorance and error is a kind of darkness. This is a standard teaching of the saints that they get really from St. Paul and other writers in the New Testament—that sin darkens our intellect. As I like to tell my students, sin makes you stupid. In other words, it makes you unable to see the truth clearly. It makes you unable to see the good and to see the beautiful and recognize them. It darkens your intellect. It also has another effect—it weakens your will. So, in my own way, I’ll say sin makes you stupid and it makes you weak. It darkens your intellect and it weakens your will.

And you might have actually had this experience, especially if maybe in the middle of your life or in your adult years, you had a major conversion. Maybe you weren’t baptized and you became baptized. Maybe you weren’t practicing the faith and you went back to confession and you had a kind of influx of grace into your life. Many people who’ve had a conversion mid-life can look back at their life before their conversion and think about some of the things they did or think about some of the things they said or some of the things they watched (entertainment they watched), and they wonder: How did I not see that that was evil? How did I not see that that

² Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on Ephesians* no. 286-287; trans. F. Larcher

was filthy? How did I not see that that was dirty or that that was wrong? And the answer is because sin darkens your intellect, because you were walking in darkness. And what Christ does—one of the ways He saves us—is not just by dying on the Cross. It's also through the gift of illumination. He illuminates the intellect, through grace, to help us be able to see the true, the good, and the beautiful...and not to be deceived.

And then He also gives the gift of strength to the will to choose the good and to love. And if you have any doubts about that, you don't have to take my word for it. You just go back to Jesus Himself in John 8:12...what does He say?

“I am the light of the world; he who follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.”

Jesus is a good Jew. He knows the image of walking on the path too. How does He describe being a disciple? Well, to be a disciple of Jesus is to walk in the light and not in the darkness. And if you do that, you'll have the light of life.