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Light – Genesis 1:3-4

Anyone know the motto of Harvard University? That's right, "Lux et Veritas," light and truth. The seal of my own college has the image of an angel pulling a sheet of cloth from the head of a young man, who then is able to see an open book in front of him. But from above and behind him shine rays of light, illuminating the pages of the book, on which are written – you guessed it – Lux et Veritas. The young man is being introduced to study, to learning; the light has revealed truth, which is found in learning. Or, at least in my academic career, in books.

Light is what *shows* us things. You can't see what you can't see, and even if "the human eye can detect the light of a single candle a hundred football fields away," it doesn't mean that there will be enough light from that candle to actually see those fields.

There is a huge difference between detecting the presence of light and being able to see by that light – and being able to understand what you see.

Here we are, back at the time of creation. Last week, we noted that dark, and water, and God were there at that moment, and even though we instinctively associate dark and darkness with fear and evil, Genesis reminds us that the dark is God's, and is not, in itself, bad.

Today, we become enlightened. Think, for a minute, how many different ways we talk about gaining knowledge, experience, and insight – all very positive things: we become, well, enlightened. We see the light. Someone illuminates a problem for us. Sight itself depends on light, so our words for finding things are sight- and light-oriented, too: uncover, discover, reveal.

Light is what makes it possible for us to use one of our primary senses, if we have it: sight. Even if our eyes aren't capable of making things out, they sometimes can still tell light from dark.

So light is our friend. Light is the great revealer. Thieves can be seen in the light; an animal is less likely to be able to sneak up on us in broad daylight; our instincts relax once we can see that there are no threats around us, and we can study our surroundings – even learn from them, in the light that allows us to observe.

Yet even though we naturally associate good things with light and bad with dark, God is in them both.

This is one of the places where Scripture's own imagery gets a bit tangled up. In this snippet of Genesis, God creates light itself just by

speaking. And that light is everywhere; there's nothing but God, the waters and light. Scripture says that God is light – but, be careful, light is not God. The opening of John's Gospel tells us that Jesus Christ is the (not a) light, the true light, sent into the world to enlighten us – and we start to slip into metaphor, because the world went through its cycle of light and dark for eons before the Word God spoke, Jesus Christ, came into the unenlightened darkness of sinful humanity to rescue us.

But. You've heard the old proverb that it's better to light one candle than curse the darkness? That's a wonderful saying, and has the ring of truth.

Yet for too many, the opposite is feels more realistic. In fact, in my work with depression and addictions and just people trying to face life, I actually remembered the proverb as a criticism: "He'd rather sit in the dark and curse the light."

That's the condition of so many in our world today. We're here in church, but even the person sitting next to you may prefer darkness, skepticism, pessimism, fatalism, emotional pain, almost anything, to the light. As a line from a song put it, "Darkness has a hunger that's insatiable; lightness has a call that's hard to hear."

In many ways, trying to walk the path of life on our own, by our own wits, skills, and willpower is like trying to go up a down escalator:

constant motion just to stay in place, running hard to get ahead – and if you stop moving, you go down.

God is in the dark, yes, but God can be harder to see and easier to ignore when you're wrapped up safe and comfortable in your own darkness, reliving the pain of your own loss, allowing the waves of self-involved pity and darkness to wash over you.

But, as 1 John says, “God is light; *in* him there is no darkness at all.” John says that light is shown in our love for one another; God also is love, God's light reveals the truth of that love. If we can't love others, *our* darkness prevents us from seeing God's light.

One other thing: while God does not call the dark bad, God does see that the light is good. And it is. The next thing that God does is separate the light from the dark. Yet God doesn't leave it.

Both dark and light are of God: but we can still use the dark to cloak us, to try and hide ourselves, our failings, our pain, our sins, not just from each other, but from God. Doesn't work.

And we know - Scripture tells us, Jesus tells us, our own consciences warn us that we just can't hide from the one who not only crafted us, but is sovereign over the dark, and is light and love.

A young man was walking in the north woods one afternoon, lost in thought. It was cold, and a nasty wind was blowing down just to his left from in front of him.

He hardly noticed, though; his mind was far away, and he sat down on a fallen tree trunk, put his head in his hands, and ached for something, someone to take away the torment that crushed him from the inside. From somewhere the words of Job's complaint came to mind: "Why didn't I die at birth? For now I would be lying down quietly; I'd sleep, rest would be mine...why is light given to the hard worker, life to those who's soul is bitter, those waiting in vain for death, who search for it more than treasure?" (Job 3:11-21, *passim*) He hardly noticed as the sun set, since it was completely overcast; night didn't so much fall as swallow him, just slowly enough that it wasn't until he lifted up his head and opened his eyes that he realized he couldn't see around him, not his feet, not his hands.

No way to figure out where he was, which way he was facing - he might as well have been in a cave, which is the way his soul felt as he started his walk earlier.

It wasn't that he'd suffered some great loss, though he might have; it wasn't that he'd failed at some goal or lost his job or that his family

had hurt him; he realized that, inside, the dark was even blacker than the night around him, and now he was completely lost, not just physically disoriented, but spiritually empty.

Why get up? What's the use? He knew he was miles from anywhere; no one knew or cared where he was, he hadn't told anyone that he was going out, and he just a visitor in town. No matches, no flashlight, not even a pocket knife; and now the cold was sinking into his bones, so he slid off the log, lay down on his back in the leaves, and felt the first drops of water on his face as rain began to fall.

"So this is how it ends - just like Elliot said, 'Not with a bang, but a whimper.'"

There in the cold, wet dark, he let despair take him - when, just as if someone had turned on a light bulb, a patch of sky opened just enough to let the moonlight in. It had been so dark that it seemed like day, and he sat up suddenly, and saw another light, this one off in the distance. As if he were grabbed by his guts, he sprung up, and in the few moment of light the clouds gave him, came on an old logging road, and once there, he just kept walking, every step feeling more sure, every thought honed on staying on the road, putting one foot in front of the other, even when the dark returned. He stumbled, even fell - but then he saw the

light again, bright, but small, and kept on walking until he realized it was coming from inside a building.

He tripped over the step to the porch and fell hard on the old wood, but the door to the old cabin opened and he pulled himself up and through the door - where there was an ancient oil lamp, flickering on a small table in the corner.

As he walked over, he noticed a book on the table. "Gulliver's Travels," open in the middle. And on that book was a piece of paper, obviously used to mark the reader's place. Written on it, in pencil, were the words: "This is the truth: Love drives out all fear. God is light, God is love, and God I know. All is not lost, but light."

He woke up in a chair in front of the room of the cheap motel he'd been staying the last week, wondering how to end it all, as the sun rose and the light spread across his face. And he said to himself as his face warmed: "I have seen dark, and I have seen light; and now I see the truth: God loves even me enough to give me back my life. 'I trust in God; I won't be afraid. What can anyone do to me? I thank you, God, because you have saved my life from death...so I can walk before God in the light of life.'" (Psalm 56:11-13)

God's given you your life, too. Did you know that? Light and truth and love: God is all three, all are the essence of God, and God does not leave you alone in the dark - it cannot conceal the God who in Christ is the light.