

"Walking in the Light"

Psalm 67; Revelation 21:9-10, 22-26

Highlands Presbyterian Church, Columbus

June 19, 2016 – 5th Sunday after Pentecost – Rev. Ronald Botts

Some time back the ruler of Syria became convinced that the greatest threat to his control was the instability presented by other faiths and sects. The people wanted freedom of thought and practice, and that was proving to be a great menace to his regime. He was in command, he reasoned, so he could do whatever he pleased, whatever he could get away with.

When he couldn't get others to give up their faith and contrary ideas voluntarily, he forced the issue. He pushed and squeezed the residents and was not reluctant to use force on his own people. He demanded that they submit to his rules and laws, no matter how onerous and painful they might be. Syria's strong man was ready and willing to use brute force against civilians, and many died from the atrocities carried out by his military.

Soldiers particularly delighted in burning many of the holy books they found and destroyed numerous places of worship. Terrified, many of those under siege fled into the countryside, and those who were able began an exodus to other lands, some even far away. The brutality of this regime is recognized far and wide.

No, I'm not referring to the current President of Syria, though much of today's situation fits this description. Pain and suffering is widespread in that ancient land and there is an unprecedented emigration for survival.

The time I'm thinking about is 160 years before the birth of Christ. Palestine was under the control of Antiochus IV, king of Syria. Antiochus became convinced that the greatest threat to his rule was the Jewish religion.

When he couldn't get the Jews to give up their faith voluntarily, he decided to force the issue. Antiochus sent out a decree that anyone who prayed to God, or insisted on obeying the Jewish law, would be killed. Then he placed a statue of Zeus on the altar that stood outside the Temple and ordered the people to bow down to it. When they refused, he ordered his soldiers to storm the Temple and seize it. Many faithful Jews were killed there.

The soldiers burned the holy books they found and destroyed the Temple furniture. Terrified, many Jews fled into the hills outside Jerusalem. These expatriates became the nucleus of a guerilla army under the direction of Judas Maccabeus. For three years they fought their foreign occupiers until, finally, they were successful and Jerusalem was returned to Jewish control.

The first thing the people did was to cleanse and repair the Temple. Copies of the holy books were made and new furniture was constructed. When the Temple was restored, the priests called for its reconsecration. From all over the country the Jews poured into Jerusalem for this very special service.

On the night of rededication a seven-branched candlestand was lit. The rabbis declared that, in the future, every Jewish family should annually celebrate this rededication of the Temple, and that it should be marked by the burning of lights.

That directive is still being followed by Jews today. The celebration is known as the Festival of Lights, or Hanukkah. It comes near Christmas and, like Christmas, gifts are usually exchanged. This religious holy day is a reminder of the Temple restoration, the time when the days of darkness were past and the lights burned bright again.

Our passage from Revelation today tells of a coming time when there will be "no temple in the city, for its temple is the Lord God, the Almighty, and the Lamb. And the city has no need of sun or moon to shine on it, for the glory of God is its light, and the lamp is the Lamb. The nations will walk by its light, and the kings of the earth will bring their glory into it. Its gates will never be shut by day—and there will be no night there."

Here is the picture of a future heavenly city but, unlike Jerusalem, its visionary sees no temple at its center. In that heavenly city there will be no need for a worship site, no need for a place of sacrifice, because God and Christ will be present in the midst of that city. People can worship and show their adoration directly.

There won't be any need for additional light, for the divine illumination itself will be sufficient. The people won't need the sun or moon or stars to get around because they will have the light of God to guide them. This is all part of the picture of the New Jerusalem that Revelation presents to us. The visionary predicts It will come to earth along with the reign of Christ.

Others have written about cities, too, but they don't sound much like the New Jerusalem. Classic authors like Victor Hugo and Charles Dickens wrote about the places they knew, about Paris and London, but the descriptions we find there are of anything but a heavenly city. These continental cities are immense places, filled with soot and grime, and all the good and bad that's characteristic of human nature. They still have need of churches because the people must elevate themselves to God's presence since the Lord's total rule has yet to come on earth.

Now I doubt if any of us would equate Columbus with the scripture's portrayal of the New Jerusalem, that heavenly-sent city. Some would try to make us think it's New Albany, but we can tell the difference! Both the great cities and the small burghs that we know are just about what you'd expect them to be. They have their good points and their tawdry aspects, but heavenly—I don't think so. Even Los Angeles, the city of angels, is that only in name and not reality.

Perhaps those in the New Jerusalem will need only God's presence to get around, but we need all the light we can get. Where we live it's dark at times so the more wattage the better. Incandescent, fluorescent, LED—you name it, we need them all. If our ancient forbearers would have had electricity, you can bet they would have taken advantage of it, too. As it was, they used lamps and torches and anything else at their disposal.

The darkness can be frightening and can contain all kinds of hidden dangers. Not surprisingly, it's the darkness that criminals most often chose as the time to do their

calculating work. The hours of darkness also seem to go the slowest, especially when we can't sleep for one reason or another.

Darkness is not just when the sun goes down, either, but it's also characteristic of the times when we feel lost in life. In such periods it isn't clear to us which direction we should go. We aren't sure whom we should trust to be our companions along the way. We can make out a few landmarks ahead, but most remain obscure. Perhaps some of us feel that we spend a lot more time groping about in the darkness than we would like.

If darkness is commonly associated with evil and trouble, then light is the characteristic we ascribe to God. Consider how that's reflected in our psalm reading for today, where it begins, "May God be gracious to us and bless us, and make his face to shine upon us."

That kind of brightness is symbolic of goodness and blessing. God, who is light, shines upon people for their good. God illumines us, cares for us, and lights up our way. It was in the coming of Jesus that the divine light began to burn its brightest and it continues to burn today. Often, though we don't feel surrounded by that kind of light.

A man was about to go across a street when a woman pulled him back and yelled that the stoplight had turned red. He replied, "But look at all the people continuing to go across." To which she replied without hesitation: "Don't look at them. Look up at the light and follow it."

Maybe that's a good lesson for us. We're so busy watching where others go, that we fail to consider where our own path lies. We're so desirous of having others lead us out of life's maze, that we fail to follow the one who can really get us to our goal. Like the man in the story, we're so often on automatic pilot and following whatever way the crowd seems to be going. Life should be something more than the blind leading the blind.

Our readings today remind us there is a better way, a truer way, a more fulfilled way. This is the way of the Lord, the one who is the light for our path. And in that light is the life we seek.

Take a clue from the cotton plant. As the sun rises, its leaves turn eastward. Then throughout the day they gradually move and follow the light across the sky. When the sun sets at evening the leaves end up pointing westward. The plant does all this so that it's always at the best angle to receive maximum sunlight. That's the way it grows best.

Now should we do the same with the light that God provides to us, perhaps we wouldn't feel so lost in life. Consider this: when you have your back to a light, then you walk forward in your own shadow. And the same thing happens to us in our faith. When we fail to turn to God for our illumination, then we walk in the shadow of our own ignorance. We can then curse the darkness or choose the brightness.

Until the kingdom of God comes in its entirety, until such a time when the heavenly city manifests itself on earth, we are still not left without hope or possibility. For Jesus himself showed us the way and, with him, we will always walk in the daylight.

The darkness in our lives can be pervasive and overwhelming, but not when we remember to do something that's so simple... turn around. The light is there and waiting once we get out of our own shadow. It will warm us and fill us and show us the direction we long for. When you turn around you find what you need and that it is already there and waiting.