

Out of Darkness (18Feb18 – 1Lent)
John 7:1-10, 8:12-20; Psalm 27

I've never yet been interrupted and cut off in a sermon, but that possibility continues to exist. So, while hoping you're not weary of my comparisons of our Bible readings, just in case you're ready to protest, I'll rush ahead.

We are in Lent. Where we have the 4th Sunday of Advent or the 7th Sunday of Easter, this is the 1st Sunday in Lent. Named for lengthening days, this is for increased light over typical deadly darkness. More on that at the end.

For this 1st Sunday in Lent, the usual lectionary always features a story of Jesus being tempted in the wilderness for 40 days. In Mark's Gospel, that's pretty much one verse. Matthew and Luke expand it as an argument or duel between Jesus and the devil about turning stones to bread and guardian angels and being king of the world. Jesus, perhaps not surprisingly, resists the temptations.

That mark of 40 days at the start of the 40(ish) day-long season of Lent, often is taken to indicate we should also be resisting temptation. That when the devil comes knocking, we say no thank you. That evil may try and test us, but we should not put the Lord our God to the test (whatever that might mean).

I don't like that sort of message. It's not much of an encouragement in my book: hey, Jesus didn't give in to temptation, so you shouldn't either! If you try really hard, you could be like him! Go give it a shot for 40 days!

It's surprising how rarely the devil is actually in the Bible, I think, especially if we picture this as the grand cosmic rivalry, the dualism of good vs. evil, heaven vs. hell. But the negative side is pretty sparse in there. The word "God" is in the Bible over 4000 times, but Satan or devil pop up just 80 times. An eighth of that total is in a little scene crammed at the start of the book of Job. There just isn't a whole lot. That isn't the point of the story or of faith.

But somehow we get drawn into the darkness, to struggles and arguments, this notion of

competition and rivalry, for one to win when the other loses. We want to be on the right side of the struggle, contending against sin, overcoming temptations that try to infiltrate us with evil. With broad strokes, we claim to elucidate evils as ugly and nasty, so we can confidently label them as demonic and awful.

Within the Gospel of John, though, there is no version of the devil tempting Jesus that would fit the usual pattern for this 1st Sunday in Lent. While God *is* embodied and God *is* incarnate in Jesus, there's nothing satanic as we would ritually imagine horrors lurking in the shadows, or demons waiting to swallow you or possess you and make your eyes glow. Not much for an R-rated flick.

The devil is simply what would obscure the light of God. To illustrate, a follow-up to the Gospel of John later in our New Testament, the letter we call 1st John, is the only place we have the term antichrist (2:22). It just means those who are against Jesus, who are anti-Christ. This requires a lower case "e" exorcism, of being re-focused on the true light.

That letter of 1st John similarly says Jesus "is light and in him there is no darkness at all. If we say that we have fellowship with him while we are walking in darkness, we lie and do not do what is true" (1:5). That's the difference between being in the light or left out in the dark, the criterion that matters.

Again, later in today's dialogue, Jesus has strong language against opponents, saying: "If God were your Father, you would love me...but you are from your father the devil...He is a liar and the father of lies" (8:42-44). But you'll notice that's no cosmic dual for the eternal fate of souls, but just what would distract us in darkness or lure us to false sources of light.

That distinction, both within and outside ourselves, doesn't involve seeking devils and demons, because when we're looking for a thriller and the bad guys, we get eager to categorize and label evil, quick to pass judgment and presume to know what is worse. When the Gospel of John defines the devil as "the ruler of this world," and

that the kingdom of Jesus is not of this world, it stands against our politics as usual and our lame horse races and how we crown our favorite winners.

While justice does require truth-telling, being honest and boldly saying what is wrong, not to be so lawless that anything goes and any behavior or speech or perspective has equal validity, while there are vital times to take a stand and be passionate advocates, this faith of ours isn't primarily about that. I confess that's a hard reminder for me especially, since I want God to be on the side of my causes and I care a lot about fixing this world.

But this isn't about being right. It's not about a legalism that parses into bad and good and tries forcefully or gracefully to leave ourselves standing on the correct side of the line. It's not fundamentally best accomplished in pointing out the faults of others, much less in trying to threaten them to shape up, either with manipulative coercions or scare tactics of eternal damnation. Neither does it limit our potential when already dim hopes are quenched.

It's so obvious to say that gun violence is bad, that school shootings are horrible, that kids shouldn't kill kids. Nobody arrives here to debate whether that should happen. That seems like the biggest, most important thing...at least for this week.

But we could also go on, with our other violence and aggressions and uncaring: it's clearly apparent that abuse is wrong, that no one should hurt helpless babies, or deny food to hungry schoolchildren, or abandon those who need shelter—whether on our streets or fleeing wars or after disaster in Puerto Rico. It's clearly despicable to dump “poison into our waters, exhaust the soils, and pollute our common air.”

But what does that mean? What does it matter once we have drawn those lines? Why do we persist in these frenzies of antagonism? Why get overcome by every flash of bad news? Does it actually make us feel better? Can it manifest a light to overcome darkness and keep evil at bay, to feel like we can do something?

The Gospel of John won't give us the fleeting satisfaction of such lists. There aren't a set of actions to accomplish that are right. There aren't a set of prejudices to avoid as wrong. Sin is hardly named period, much less in rankings of what's worse, for us to qualify ourselves as a bit better insiders and harder workers.

In fact, Jesus says that he judges no one. I don't suspect that would mean he doesn't care, that everything is equal to him and it doesn't matter what anybody does. Instead, the best I can figure for this morning, is that he's trying to point us away from the notion that our task is about being judgmental, that our core identity is in labeling others as wrong. Drawing us to light, he distracts from our presumed task of ruling as arbiters and judges and shady critics who wind up so self-righteous. We don't, in essence, come to church in order to figure out a bit more justice, to be cheered on in our little projects to build a better world. Jesus must see that as a dead-end street.

Instead we come here for what we really need, to be enlightened in our true and shared identity, as children of this everloving God, to live with God's life, to emerge from too much darkness that permeates our world and—when we're honest about it—our own blackly bleakly ashen uncertain lives. Unlike the fading glimmers of what we have so well figured out, from such overcast existence, we come in here to soak up the bright rays of the sun, our only source of hope.

I AM the light of the world, Jesus says.

To conclude, I hope it's helpful to share background of this story's setting. Jesus was at the Festival of Booths, the celebration of Sukkoth, one of three major pilgrimage celebrations for going to Jerusalem, up to the temple. And this was the biggest festival, biggest party of all.

It recalled when the people were wandering in the wilderness and built booths or huts—the Hebrew word for those gives the name Sukkoth to the festival. It was also at a place with that name that God began to appear to the people in a pillar of fire to guide their journey, as a beacon, a glowing reminder of presence (Exodus 13).

Here's how one of my professors, Craig Koester, extends the explanation:*

Jesus' claim to be the light of the world was made in the temple where the most spectacular rituals of the festival took place. Each evening, worshipers crowded into the women's court, where four enormous lamp stands were erected, each with large arms that supported four large bowls of oil with wicks made from the discarded undergarments of the priests. [*I was thinking of burning some of my old boxer shorts today to help you get a sense of this divine light. Not really.*] Throughout the night...the light [of the burning lamps] shone incessantly. Its rays gleamed from the temple's white stone walls and the bronze gate at the end of the courtyard, where the Levites played their harps, lyres, cymbals, and trumpets, as men noted for their piety and good works sang and danced to the Songs of Ascents [from the Psalms] with as many as eight flaming torches in their hands. [*I also bypassed the hula torch dance for today, but anyway*]...

The radiance emanating from the temple illumined courtyards throughout the city until the first shafts of daylight appeared over the Mount of Olives [when a procession with a ram's horn] stopped at the gate that led eastward out of the sanctuary, then turned around to face...the temple with their backs to the rising sun. [The prophet Ezekiel had seen people worshipping the rising sun] Those at the Feast of Booths, however, were to reject this false worship by saying, "Our fathers when they were in this place turned with their backs toward the temple of the Lord and their faces to the east...but as for us, our eyes are turned to the Lord."

[*This was paired with a vision from the prophet Zechariah, revisited in the last chapter of our Bibles, that the presence of God would mean continual day, this light always shining from the temple, a perpetually restored pillar of fire.*]

According to John's Gospel [concludes Professor Koester], Jesus was the one in whom the hopes of the Festival of Booths were realized. He was the light that manifested the presence of God and the one in whom the nations of the world would come to know God.

There you have it. That is why we are here. For celebration. This is a Sunday *in* and not *of* Lent because when we are here we cannot remain

downcast. "The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom then shall I fear? Of whom shall I be afraid?" We have to celebrate, rejoice in the increasing light, filled with Alleluias. Here, if not to burn our underwear, turned from bright east windows, still to play cymbals and banjos and sing and have a party, oriented rightly and gathered around Jesus, the light that will never be put out. In dark days with dim hopes and false glares, that is what our world needs, and us too.

* *Symbolism in the Fourth Gospel*, p157-8