

Moving Into the Light ~ Judges 4:1-24; I Thessalonians 5:1-11; Matthew 25:14-30; Psalm 123 11-13-05

I know that most of us here have heard the expression that “It is always darkest before the dawn.” This time of year seems to be bent on showing us the truth of this saying.

Have you ever noticed how our moods seem to change as we move from the seasons of light and brightness into the season of darkness? We become a little dark and gloomy as the days march toward winter.

Winter really is not the season of darkness; especially on snow covered, full moon nights when the entire earth seems to be alight with a special glow. But, late fall and winter are the times of the year when we receive less than the desired amount of sunshine. I know I patiently wait until the end of December to see the days begin to lengthen a bit by a minute here or there and begin to feel as if I am emerging back out into the light once more as we move toward spring. The farther north we are the more precious the light seems to become.

At the beginning of November the sun rises at 6:26 a.m. and sets at 4:53 p.m. By the end of November it rises at 6:59 a.m. and sets at 4:21 p.m. That is the loss of one hour of light per day and it only gets worse after that. By the end of December sunset is at 4:49 but sunrise is at 7:18. It seems we cannot win for losing. 7:18, however, is the latest the sun rises here as it begins to set later and later in the day. By the end of January the sun is rising at 7:04 and setting at 5:03. Hope springs eternal. We know we will move from the darkness back into brighter days.

The Israelites were continually plunging themselves into darkness by giving up on the one true God, about whom Moses and Joshua had told them, and following the gods they would find worshipped by the nations around them. This always created a disturbance for their Maker and something bad would happen to that nation because of it.

Today’s reading from the Old Testament comes from The Book of Judges. It is considered a “transitional” book because it appears after the deaths of Moses and Joshua and before David arose as the king. The leaders during this time of transition were nothing like those who had come before nor like those who would appear later. They were people who served the Lord, but they were people who, sometimes, had feet of clay. They tried their best but often faltered.

Not only does this Old Testament book focus on the transition in leadership but also in the transition of the entire nation from one of disparate groups to one of a new community with a new pattern of life for the people. Those who had roamed the wilderness for forty years were going to settle down in their own land.

This morning we read the story of Deborah, one of the judges. We really read the story of Jael defeating Sisera. It is a little bit gory, but then, many stories in our Bible are. It points to what it is people can accomplish, even women, when God is on their side and when they are moving into the light after dwelling in darkness. For the nation Israel, this process always seemed to see them moving two steps forward and one back.

Our reading from the New Testament is the familiar parable of the talents. One would hope that people would be encouraged to move more fully into the light of the knowledge of Christ after hearing this story. It reminds us that it is what we do with the lives and the gifts that have been given us that matters the most. While grace is a major point in our religion, good works that lead us to fuller lives are important, also.

I know I have told you that I grew up in a large church by National Association standards. It had 1800 members when I was a child. It now has about 900. I do not remember ever singing “Amazing Grace” in my home church because we were a church that believed in good works.

We were always blessed by a group of volunteers that was and still is very strong and that made the pursuit of good works a priority.

Years ago an outreach program was started to help feed the hungry through one of the local Catholic churches on the south side of Milwaukee. The first Friday of each month a group of volunteers would gather at the church to make macaroni and cheese and fish and salad and dessert and transport the entire meal several miles away to serve it to those who were less fortunate. Many who came for a meal were families that simply could not make ends meet.

I remember, while still in seminary, being at the very first shared meal and celebrating the sacrament of communion for all the workers gathered there. I think this was quite an interesting event for those many who were Catholic, but they all joined in even though it was a woman breaking the bread and pouring the wine. From this very first step more than twenty years ago, this program has continued. It has endured because of the commitment of those lay people who decided to take the talents they had and invest them in the service of others. I know the numbers active in this group have decreased. Yet, there remains a core of workers believing strongly in what they do. So, in spite of living through four ministers in the past twenty years and the loss of some of their fellow workers, they have persisted. Because of these devoted volunteers, this program has helped many who dwell in darkness for much of their lives see the blessing of the light.

We all have talents to invest in the welfare of others. Too often we forget this and work only for our selves and our own glory. In investing our talents wisely we will find that we become light-bearers to those who often can only see the darker side of life, a side in which there is little to no hope. We have been blessed, we need to share our blessings with others. There is no better time to reflect on this than in our season of Thanksgiving.

Being children of the light makes us very special. Because we are such, we are expected to know what to do to reveal this light to all others. Paul reminds the readers of his First Letter to the Thessalonians of this. We are not just to sit and bask in the glow of that special light. We believe in the way, the truth and the life of Christ. The best way we can reveal this is to serve others in one way or another. There really is no one way that is better than any other or lesser than any other.

Some of us have been blessed by very much and we are asked to share generously from our great bounty. Others have been blessed with not as much, but it is still up to us to share what it is we have with those who have not. In this way we strengthen and build up one another. In this way we live out our faith and just do not talk about it. Talk always is cheap, our actions prove who we are and whose we are.

Jael probably did not know too much about the God of the Israelites when she took that tent peg in her hand and dispatched Sisera. But, she did what she could do to help advance the nation Israel. I would guess you could say she invested her talent in the service of that nation. The men in the parable who took the money they were given and used it to increase its value for their master were wise stewards of all that God had given them. They ended up in the profit column while the poor fellow who simply buried his talent ended up in the darkness.

To keep moving into the light we need to discover what it is we are best at doing in and for the world and then “just do it.” This is what God has asked of us all throughout the ages. Can we hear Him now? Amen