



March 18-20, 2023 -- 4<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Lent

Preacher: Pastor Scott Oelhafen

Sermon Theme: Live in the Light of the LORD

Sermon Text: Ephesians 5: 8-14

***8 For you were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Live as children of light 9 (for the fruit of the light consists in all goodness, righteousness and truth) 10 and find out what pleases the Lord. 11 Have nothing to do with the fruitless deeds of darkness, but rather expose them. 12 For it is shameful even to mention what the disobedient do in secret. 13 But everything exposed by the light becomes visible, 14 for it is light that makes everything visible. This is why it is said: "Wake up, O sleeper, rise from the dead, and Christ will shine on you."***

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, dear friends of Jesus, who is the Light of the World,

Are you afraid of the dark? Silly question, right? After all, I am talking to grown-ups. I'm talking to Americans, people who can do anything. Okay. I don't like to admit it either, but I'm not a big fan of the dark. So have you ever been in complete and total darkness? I've been in this kind of darkness only once in a National Park called Mammoth Cave in southeastern Kentucky. I was on a family trip back in grade school. We were assigned to a tour group and our guide did a great job pointing out the stalactites and stalagmites. And once we were deep underground, the guide explained what the caves were like before they were wired with electricity. Then, he did something very odd. He told us that he was going to turn off all the lights. Then, about 30 seconds later, he flipped a switch and everything around us went instantly black. I remember two distinct things. First, it was dark – not just New Ulm dark, but pitch-black – the darkest dark I had ever experienced. I put my hand in front of my face and couldn't even feel it. A second sensation gripped me ... fear. What if the tour guide took his hand off the light switch? What if he never found it again? We'll never find our way out. We'll be trapped, lost, and ... It's okay – as you can tell by me standing here – the lights finally went on and we made it out just fine.

But, what is it about the dark? What is it being a little kid at a sleepover for the very first time and wondering: "Will there be a nightlight?" What is it about walking down into the basement of grandma's house and wondering: "Where is that light?" "Will I trip, fall and never make it out again?" Isn't the fear of the dark just the fear of the unknown or the fear of being all alone? It's this fear of the dark that makes light, especially bright light, all the more appealing, safe, and a source of relief and joy. Now you know why Holy Scripture calls Jesus Christ the Light of the World (John 9:5). So on this fourth weekend in Lent, St. Paul picks up this imagery of light as he unleashes the floodlights of the Gospel and directs us to **Live in the Light of the LORD**. First, he tells us to glow in His light. And he then instructs us to be guided by His light.

Ever hear of “phosphorescence”? Phosphorescence is the science behind “glow-in-the-dark” stickers. Special molecules in the plastic stickers absorb light. Energy from a light source is stored in these stickers and is slowly released over time. Many objects are not “phosphorescent” on their own – things like rocks, concrete, and steel. Some objects are too ugly, gross, or dirty to light up a room and we’d probably prefer they stay in the dark ... old basement walls, sump pumps, you get the idea.

In God’s eyes, all sin is ugly. Sin is gross. Sin is dirty and it dirties people who are contaminated by it and puts sinners in spiritual darkness. A dirty little secret is that God is not going to send sin to hell at the end of time, but sinners. That’s a scary thought because that category of sinner includes us. That’s why Paul starts out the way he does when he says: **8 For you were once darkness**, This is not just a crack-pot theory, but a Bible fact. Earlier in Ephesians, Paul expanded on our dark spiritual condition as he put our human condition under the microscope: **As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins, in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient. All of us also lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our sinful nature and following its desires and thoughts. Like the rest, we were by nature objects of wrath.** Paul pinpoints our real problem: in a manner of speaking, we were born with spiritually-burned-out-batteries. We had no machinery to rescue us from under our own Mammoth Caves of sin. Quite frankly, we didn’t even have a shovel. Added to this, we are made of dust – certainly not phosphorescent material. We have no spiritual light on our own. We have no way to escape what deep down, we know we deserve. The Bible tells us we deserve eternal darkness in hell, every one of us, because of the things we’ve done or left undone. Look at your own sin. Look at your own heart. When we stand exposed under the light of God’s blazing Law, it’s not a pretty place to be. Yet, that’s what the Bible does to us to show us how dirty we are, how bad it is, and how we deserve to be left alone by God forever. Talk about fear of the dark!

But, this fear disappears when God brings us into a brand new light. With a Gospel invitation, Paul invites every one of us: **“Wake up, O sleeper, rise from the dead, and Christ will shine on you.” Wake up, O sleeper!** – what an awesome power of Jesus in the graveyard of Bethany, a few miles outside of Jerusalem. Jesus simply commanded His dead friend who had been rotting in the grave for four days: **Lazarus, come out!** Just like that, Lazarus came out of the grave, awake and alive. So the Holy Spirit awakens us from stone cold unbelief and brings us saving faith. The light of Jesus’ holy life and cleansing power of His blood washes us clean from every one of our dirty and deadly sins. More than that, His forgiveness penetrates the very molecules of our heart so that we positively glow in the light of His love. Knowing we are forgiven, that our sins have been paid for, that our home in heaven has been secured, that change us for time and for eternity.

What if Jesus decided to love us only once-in-a-while? What if He only forgave “most” of our sins? What if Judgment Day took place during a moment we weren’t glowing? We’d be stuck in eternal darkness forever. But, Jesus is the light of the world and His light will never go out. We don’t depend on our works but His. His power is more stable and more spectacular than a

nuclear power plant. If you want peace of mind during your week, lasting spiritual strength in your relationships, yes, enduring hope on a death-bed, just look at what Jesus did for us. Each day during Lent, look at His blood-stained cross and empty tomb. His love for sinners like us blows us away. If you want to live as children of the light, and I know you do, then realize that our spiritual life begins and continues only because we are now spiritually phosphorescent – glowing in the light of Jesus. We can't always see it, but Jesus does. Because of Jesus, God wants us to shine as His lights in this dark world of sin.

So what does His rescue from certain darkness mean to us? Does it make a difference on a cold March Saturday/Sunday? When I think of being rescued from darkness, I think of 33 Chilean miners who were trapped underground back in 2010. Do you remember what happened? The world held it's collective breath for 69 days while world experts tried to find a way to save them. I remember watching the news and cheering in my living room when the first rescued miner came to the surface. It was so dark underground, that the rescued miners had to wear sunglasses because the outside world was just too bright to behold. Some came out pointing to the sky, giving credit to God. Others hugged their family. Now, can you imagine if even one of those miners looked around at his rescuers and says: "Forget it. I'm going back underground"? Then, he proceeds to go back to the darkness of the mine. He goes back to the darkness of certain death. Why would anyone do that?

Spiritually speaking, it happens more often than you think. It happens when people ignore the truth of God's bright Word and go back to their sinful ways. The crazy thing is it can happen to church-going folks who can be so easily blinded by the darkness of evil. That's why we all need this spiritual reminder to **Live in the Light of the LORD**. We need to be guided by the light of His Word every day. Why do you think Paul gave this warning? **11 Have nothing to do with the fruitless deeds of darkness, but rather expose them. 12 For it is shameful even to mention what the disobedient do in secret.** Paul shines the light of God's Word in our hearts and shows how easily sin traps us. What sin, you ask? Look at it this way. A mother once confronted her son: "Young man, this morning, there were two cookies in the pantry. Now there is only one. Can you explain this?" The young man simply replied: "It must have been so dark, I didn't see the other one." The point is this: "living in sin is like living in darkness". We don't always realize that we will be caught and that there is punishment. Why miss out on God's forgiveness and joy? Paul warns us that once we recognize the darkness of sin in our lives, to stop, to leave it, in the past, and get help from trusted Christians if we can't. He says in Galatians 5:21: **I warn you, as I did before, that those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God.** Why go deeper into the cave? Why stay in sin? It's not worth it. Instead, Paul tells us: **Live as children of light 9 (for the fruit of the light consists in all goodness, righteousness and truth) 10 and find out what pleases the Lord.** Live each day as people of God who are blessed. Live with joy as Christian spouses, students, teachers, parents, and children of God who walk in His light, grateful for the Holy Spirit who turned on the light spiritually and made it possible so we can see the love of God and practice the love of God every day.

When you know how dark and terrifying sin is, the words of Paul aren't a threat, but an encouragement. Following Jesus in this life is not a confusing maze because we're simply

following the light of His Holy Word. Jesus truly shows us the way as we stay close to Him. If you are afraid of the dark, don't worry – that's normal. But, with the light of Jesus, glow, go, so that others will know that Jesus is the light of the world. Amen.