



## 4 Lent

10 March, 2002

1 Samuel 16:1-13

Psalm 23

Ephesians 5:8-14

John 9:1-41

Imagine with me a dark place. Perhaps in a wood or a field. Perhaps a dark building – or, if it's part of your experience – in a dark cave. If you're outdoors, the stars and whatever moon there might be are covered over by heavy clouds. There are no street or yard lights. No light from passing traffic. If you're in a building, heavy drapes are drawn across the windows – and no light seeps under doorways. And if you want to know true darkness, imagine a cave or a mineshaft where there is nothing but a darkness so total that it strikes terror in the heart.

Now, start moving around in this darkness – you know what happens. In the woods, a log is in the way. You trip, perhaps you fall. The result, a bruise, perhaps a scrape or cut. You walk tentatively across the field, but there's a prairie dog hole or some other irregularity – you step into it, your balance is off, you sprain an ankle if you're lucky – if not, you break a bone. In the house, pieces of furniture seem to move in out of nowhere and you bang your shin – or you walk into a wall – or you miss a stair and down you go. A cave or mineshaft without light is so dark that you lose sense of up, down, left or right – disorientation is total – you can't even detect parts of your own body.

For almost as long as we human beings have spoken and kept track of our thoughts and feelings, we have noted certain states in ourselves, in our lives, in our cultures that have had much in common with the experience of disorienting, body-bruising darkness. Tomorrow will be the six-month anniversary of September 11, 2001. On that day our nation entered into a kind of collective darkness – the whole world seemed shadowed over – we seemed, and still seem, to be stumbling in the night. This past week, the family and friends of Dick McKennett suddenly found themselves plunged into a dark, dark place – suddenly, unexpectedly, a beloved husband, father, grandfather, friend, pillar of our faith community was taken in death. And there is no one here who has not had experiences that have been – or still are – like a helpless, fear-filled, injurious, or debilitating stumbling around in deep darkness. St. John of the Cross, a Spanish Mystic described this descent into darkness, this indwelling of darkness, “the dark night of the soul.” And there is no way any of us can escape this experience.

Back to imagining. In a dark field, a light begins to shine in the darkness and that light comes nearer and nearer until it is held up to illumine a path and together with the light bearer we make our way through the darkness. In a darkened room, a candle is lighted and we no longer bang our shins or stub our toes on hard pieces of furniture. In the total absence of light that is experienced in a cave, a small lantern seems to shine as brightly as the sun. And even if our eyes do not see, our hands, the skin on our face can feel the warmth that comes with light.

Among the many, many blessings of my life is the parish in which I was raised. The church of my childhood, adolescence, and young adulthood was one where there was great diversity. In that downtown Lutheran parish, there were people after whom I could model my life. As I became aware of my sexuality, though the world outside was a very dark place, inside that faith community there was the light of unconditional acceptance. And the Gospel was so proclaimed and the Holy Sacraments so administered that I knew God's love for me was without condition, limit or end. I came to know in that place that Christ was the light of my world – at times the only light in the deep darkness of a world that rejected me and my sort.

This morning's Gospel breaks into a mindset in which illness, handicap, retroviruses, mental illness, cancer, or being different in any way were and often still are considered as signs of moral failing, of inferiority, of weakness, of Otherness. We hear Jesus enter into a culture of categorical exclusions – and Jesus, to the dismay of many, chooses one whom the religiously correct thought was the result of a morally inferior condition because he was blind. With spit and mud, Jesus anoints someone whose very humanity came under debate by the Pharisees and their hangers-on. With this action, Jesus proclaimed that he does not look at people according to the exclusionary ways of religious elitism. Instead, Jesus chooses to give the gift of light to one whom the culture thought was surely among the ungodly. In this morning's first reading too, we hear that God chooses to anoint David with the Spirit – even though to the eyes of others this child seemed most unlikely to be an instrument of God, and who as an adult would seem even more unlikely to be an instrument of God.

Lent is the season of the Church year in which we prepare for the great Paschal feast – for Easter. At the Easter vigil when the new fire, the light of the resurrected Christ, is rekindled, all the baptized remember with those who are being baptized that all – all – who come to the waters receive the Spirit of Christ and of Christ's resurrection. This is no mere audio-visual teaching aid. In baptism we truly receive the light of Christ – without condition – and by the power of God, we are also reborn, resurrected to show forth Christ's light in the darkness, to one another and to the world. And it is all a gift, a power-filled gift, and ours merely for trusting that it is so.

Beloved of God, chosen of God – once you were darkness, but now in the Lord, you are light. You have been anointed as God's servants, you have been sealed with the Holy Spirit. Go forth from this place: you who are risen from the dead by your baptism into Christ, you are the light for those who mourn, you are the light for those who have lost their way in a world that does not care, you are the light for those who suffer the dark night of the soul, you are the light for those with broken hearts, you are the light for the last, the least, the lonely, and the unloved. You, chosen and beloved, are the light of the world, always, always bearing the light of Christ, the light of compassion, peacemaking, kindness, love, justice, and mercy to a world that sits in darkness and the shadow of death. Chose and beloved of God, go forth and let that light shine – and shine – and shine.