

ADDRESSING THE DARKNESS

Year B, Lent 4: Num. 21:4-9; Ps. 107:1-3, 17-22; Eph. 2:1-10; Jn. 3:14-21

At the very end of our Second Reading this morning, a portion of the letter to the Ephesians, the apostle makes a quiet observation that we might easily gloss over in light of all the prior discussion of trespasses and God's initiative in Christ Jesus to save the congregation at Ephesus from their former depravity. He says, "We are what [God] has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life."

The statement is a bit of theological shorthand designed, I suspect, to inspire those who had received the truth of the gospel through gifted teachers like Saint Paul, to see *themselves* as evangelists, people called by their own experience of grace and then faith to communicate to others the rebirth, if you will, that pure love and genuine forgiveness provide. Jesus' parable of the prodigal son is the paradigm that might best interpret this experience of God's unconditional, saving love: though dead in trespasses/sins, God loves us back to life, especially when we know we aren't worth the bother.

The parable of the prodigal son ends inconclusively: our love of happy endings has us imagine that the parable ends with the father and the elder brother, who has severely challenged the father on his kindly response to the younger brother, reconciled and returning to the welcome home celebration for the younger brother. In fact, we don't know exactly what happened, and the story is probably richer for the ambiguity it leaves. But what is even more absent from the parable is the response of the younger brother who was, for lack of a better word, redeemed.

And it is here that the author of the passage from today's reading from Ephesians suggests an ending that might just serve: "we are what God has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life." In other words, if we really are touched, perhaps healed, by the truth of the gospel, in that moment of transformation/salvation/ redemption/resurrection – however you like to think of it – there is also a call for us to respond; to love and welcome and forgive and incorporate others with the love, welcome, forgiveness, and incorporation we ourselves have received. I like to think that, at the very least, the prodigal son became the kind of gracious parent, spouse, friend, and brother his father had modelled; and that his family and their community became a place of welcome and forgiveness, forever saved from the lure of self-indulgence the younger son exhibited, and forever free of the jealousy and resentment the elder son demonstrated in the story.

The proclamation of Holy Baptism, like the proclamation of all our readings from Scripture this morning, is that God addresses the darkness in our world and in our experience. We may complain against God, we may discount or relativize our blessings and thereby seek to make God small or even absent in our lives, but the proclamation of God's enduring goodness remains and invites us to faith in the power and presence of God in a world which, to this day, exhibits a penchant for evil and darkness.

The call of Holy Baptism, the call of the author of the letter to the Ephesians, the call of John the evangelist through his unique interpretation of the meaning of Jesus' life, ministry, suffering, death, and resurrection is *discipleship*; joining God in addressing the darkness that is part of the human condition, and doing something about it.

And so, as each of us renews our baptism this morning in the proclamation of Sadie's baptism, the challenge is given to recognize ourselves, not only Sadie, as those who have been "created in Christ for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life."

We don't have to look far to see the darkness of poverty and homelessness in our community and in our world. We don't have to look far to see the darkness of injustice and fear. We don't have to look far to see the darkness of waste and self-indulgence that tug at the fabric of humanity and despoil the beauty and balance of nature.

God calls us in the darkness and in the light to address the darkness as disciples, as those who have received love, welcome, forgiveness, and incorporation as the people of God, children of the light.