

“From Darkness into Light”

Sermon for Sunday, July 11th, 2010 by The Rev. Joe Summers

Last week, in our reading from Luke’s gospel, we heard how, when the 70 disciples returned and reported to Jesus how they had been able to heal and free people in the villages they had been sent out to---two by two---Jesus said that he had had a vision of “Satan, falling like lightning from the sky.” It’s a vision of Satan no longer ruling life on earth.

This week I am struck by the language we hear in Colossians that says, “(we have) been rescued from the power of darkness and transferred into the kingdom of Jesus, in whom we have redemption and the forgiveness of sins.”

First, notice the verb tenses. It doesn’t say we will get rescued from the power of darkness and transferred into the kingdom of Jesus, the kingdom of light: it says we have been.

Combined with what we heard about the disciples last week, it is a vision that we are to live as citizens of our true home (heaven), here and now, and extend the dominion of heaven, here on earth, and perhaps most importantly that we have been given the power and authority to do this.

We have been rescued from the power of darkness and transferred to the kingdom of light, the kingdom of Jesus. It contradicts so much that we encounter that says that we are essentially spectators to what is most important, and there is little we can really do to make a difference. We hear this from:

*all those folks who claim nothing significant can happen till everyone accepts their particular religion or till Jesus returns,

*all those who claim that human beings are so corrupt that things have always been and always will be pretty rotten here on earth,

*all those who claim we should let experts or societal leaders take care of things, that if others get involved, it will just make matters worse,

*all those who claim that we can’t or shouldn’t change long-standing societal ideas about who owns what and what they can do with it.

We have been rescued from the power of darkness and transferred to the kingdom of light, the kingdom of Jesus, to help extend the reign of God here on earth.

How? It’s as simple as the Good Samaritan Story. It’s about letting the light live in us, and letting the light lead us. But the story also tells us it is not as simple as it sounds. A non-contextual reading of this story says it is basically as simple as random acts of kindness. This is a misreading. Instead, it has everything to do with claiming the authority and freedom

to act as the children of the light. That is, in this story, the reason why the priest and the church lawyer didn't do the right thing was because they were following the scriptural guidelines that said that people who want to be pure shouldn't be touching blood. (Undoubtedly this was a good way to justify their fears, but none the less the scriptures do say that.) I think, so often, the reason why people don't do the right thing isn't just because we're concerned about ourselves, but it's because some authority is telling us we shouldn't do what our guts say we should do. The story says that when the Samaritan saw the man lying bleeding on the side of the road, his bowels melted within him, that is, he felt compassion, and he claimed the freedom and the power to act on it. That feeling within him helped him to ignore both his fears and those authorities (even if they came from the Bible) that said "don't act."

As Father Eduardo de la Torre has pointed out, this becomes even more important in a world where, again and again, we're confronted with crimes that are about to happen or in the process of happening. Now many folks simply want us to be about charity, which in essence means to wait until the crime has happened, and then go in and help the victims. Certainly, Jesus spent a good part of his ministry going around helping individuals who were suffering from the myriad of symptoms that come with great oppression and exploitation. But what distinguishes Jesus from those of us who want to stay liked by everybody (who doesn't like those who give to charity?) and from those who want to make sure they're only doing the right thing (you can never be involved in a messy situation and do everything just right) is that he was willing to get messy, to enter into the fray and to try to prevent the crimes from happening, whether it was through political domination, economic exploitation, or cultural and religious subjugation. Ultimately, he understood that the kingdom of light was not going to happen here on earth unless people opened themselves to the light, and then let the reign of light happen in and through them. And our scriptures say, again and again, this reign of the light happens through ordinary people. I love Amos's words, "I am no prophet, nor a prophet's son, I am a herdsman and a dresser of sycamore trees.. but the Lord said to me, 'Go prophesy to my people Israel' ". This is a person with no illusions about his expertise, but who has still found the power to act. This is the power of one whose authority comes from his experience of the light. So often, the vision of those whose authority comes from institutions, is corrupted by the institutions they serve, which is why the reign of God always seems to be emerging, in part, from those on the margins.

We have been rescued from the power of darkness and transferred to the kingdom of light, the kingdom of Jesus, to help extend the reign of God here on earth.

I almost weep when I hear these words. They describe an experience that is so far from the day-to-day experience of so many I meet. Even here in Ann Arbor, so many people live, not experiencing the light and feeling empowered to extend the reign of the light, but instead living under the dominion of violence, addiction, fear, guilt, shame, ignorance, tradition, so often living lives that look more like a rat race than a really human life, or who are closed off in their prosperity, having succumbed to the despair of believing that all they can do is take care of their own.

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I long for people to experience this power. So much in our world, so much in our environment, is crying out for the reign of compassion, the reign of right relationship. We need the kind of spiritual, cultural, and political renewal that will empower people to reclaim their authority, the authority of the children of God, for what needs to happen, will not happen, unless this happens. So let us claim our inheritance as saints in light and be filled with the knowledge of God's will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, and lead lives worthy of Jesus by bearing the fruit of good works and being strong in God's power, and being able to patiently endure, while giving thanks to God.

For if we are willing, God is able, and if we are ready, God has already gone ahead to prepare a way for us. Amen.

