



March 22, 2020

Lead Us by Faith

The Reverend Dr. John A. Dalles
Ephesians 5:8-14

Friends, this is our second Sunday coming to you via the church website and my blog. The way we are reaching out to you may change, because we have a special task force at work to provide additional ways of communicating. We have heard from a number of you that you appreciated being able to access the bulletin and sermon on the website last Sunday, and we have added a few features this week, including the ability for you to see and hear us.

Our Scripture today is our lectionary reading for the morning, so it comes to us as a passage in which we are sharing along with our Christian sisters and brothers round the globe. We are praying for them, and they are praying for us. It is a reminder to us that we are one in Christ.



Just an hour and a half from where we are — this morning — is the largest natural cave in the state of Pennsylvania: Laurel Caverns. Maybe you have been there. Maybe you have gone inside the cave, and taken the tour. Maybe you have descended into the earth, where it is wet and chilly. On a three-hour-long guided tour, descending over forty stories. At the bottom, perhaps, you found yourself in a vast underground room.

There, the guide gave you a taste of what it is like — without any light. First, the guide said, *“Stay absolutely still.”* And then, the guide turned off all the lights. And there you were in the darkness that was so intense, it was as if some strange force was right there, as close as your face.

Then, the guide lit one match.

The light from that match — it was enough. It illuminated the entire space, and dispelled the darkness. That is the kind of light the letter to the Ephesians is driving at.

Now, the contrast means what it says, which is powerful in and of itself. Think of being at the bottom of Laurel Caverns, and suddenly experiencing it with all of the lights turned out. Or then, being there thereafter, with one small match lit. Only then will you be in the proper frame of mind to hear what the letter is saying.

So what was going on, then, that prompted such a passage?

Biblical scholars tell us that what was going on in that early Christian era was this: There was a cult worship practice that pre-dated the gods and goddesses of Mount Olympus. It had to do with secret festivals that were “sacred mysteries.” We could ask, where are they now? The answer would be, they are pretty much nowhere. They have come to naught. Those hidden practices of ancient times are gone.

We might ask what happened to them. The answer would be — they were brought out of the darkness and into the light. And just as the passage says, *“Everything exposed by the light becomes visible.”* Once visible, it no longer held any interest, influence, or appeal. It faded away.

What does that have to do with us? We don’t live in an era of mysterious ancient religious practices hidden away in the dark. So it may be hard for us to get what the passage is driving at.

Then again, maybe not.

Maybe we can agree that there are still practices that happen in the cover of darkness that need to be brought into the light. It may be that danger lurks there, and it cannot be seen until the light shines there.

Ask about the world at this very moment. It may be that people are stumbling around in the darkness, unaware — unable to find their way — not knowing how dangerous it is, and how that dark pathway leads to ruin and death. Won't someone help? We wonder.

It happened in another setting — one of our national parks. The travelers got there late in the evening, long after dark. They had made arrangements to stay in a particular lodging place in the park. At the desk, their reservation was confirmed, and a key was issued. Brief directions were given, as well. So they checked into their room, and, since it was late, they went to bed and were soon fast asleep.

The next morning, they awakened, and opened the curtains. And there, a very, very short distance from their door, was a huge drop-off. And beyond it, nothing at all, down and down and down, for hundreds of feet — in fact, all the way down to the Colorado River. They were on the very edge of the Grand Canyon.

The night before, they could not see, and did not know the danger. Fortunately, they stuck to the path to their door, and did not wander from it. But not everyone in life is so lucky.

This very moment, there are people in the dark, and on edge. It is as if they are calling out for someone to guide them; to teach them; to show them the way; to go with them; to lead them, by faith.

Has the realization dawned upon you? That someone is you. You have the power of the light. You can shine the light of Christ into our day and time.

Hear what John Calvin says about it:

*"The faithful are called light,
both because they have the true light in them
which enlightens them,
and also because they give light to others,
insomuch that their honest conversation
reproves the life of wickedness."*

There you go. You have the true light in you, which enlightens you. You gain insight from God that — try as you might — you cannot generate yourself. It is the light bulb going off — the "ah ha!" moment. The realization of God's plan, God's work, God's will. Oh, this is what God wants, what God expects, what God anticipates I should do. Now then, may I do it. In so doing, you give light to others.

You have seen it happen yourself — here in this sanctuary, probably — when you have light, and you share it. We do that on Christmas Eve — from one candle to the next, down one pew, and then another, until the whole room is filled with light. What we see happening then, is what Ephesians calls us to do, every day, as followers of Jesus, the Light of the world.

Receive the light. Be the light. Share the light.

There is a dangerous tangent we want to avoid at all costs. This is not a call to self-righteousness — a self-righteousness that boasts:

"Look here, you poor stumblers in the dark, we are the light. Aren't we special? We can shed the light. Aren't you lucky we can do that?"

Such an attitude is not only wrongheaded, it will produce no positive results. All it will do is create resentment. By contrast, this is a call to being about the business of our Lord, in an attitude of humble service; of sharing His precepts, so that others can hear and accept them; of showing His love, so that others can sense it; of proclaiming His lifesaving power, so that others can be saved and rejoice. It happens, not because of us, but through the power of His might. John Wesley notes: *"In the power of His might — a very uncommon expression, plainly denoting what great assistance we need. As if His might would not do. It must be the powerful exertion of His might."*

There is probably some aspect of your life that needs the power of His might — the powerful exertion of His might — in order to do what needs doing. Know that Christ can do that. For you. Christ will never lead us into darkness; Christ will not lead us into trouble and sorrow; Christ will lead us into the light.

Have you noticed? When things are going well, we don't think about the light. We move along, doing our own thing. We live unintentionally. Then, darkness approaches. And we wonder if we can make it to our destination before the light fails.

Ephesians focuses on discipleship — on how we go into light, to trust and share the grace that has been given to us in Christ Jesus.

When we walk in the light, we are wise, not naïve. When we walk in the light, we are committed — to justice and compassion. When we dwell in the light, we become light to others. As the hymn says:

*“Sleeper, awake!
Rise from the dead,
and Christ will shine on you.”*

Amen.