4-21/22-18 Rev. Amy Haines

1 John 1:1-2:2 Walk in the Light Easter Season Series

In the flatlands of NW OH, you can literally see a car’s headlights coming toward you for miles.

And except for a stray street light or the security lights on every farmhouse and barn, the night sky is dark and clear enough to see the wonder and glory of a sky full of stars.

One day I would love to see the aurora borealis, better known as the northern lights, and their dance of color and movement across the night sky.

The stars remind me of one of the first psalms of praise I ever learned. Psalm 8 proclaims in part:

O Lord, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth! You have set your glory above the heavens. … When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars that you have established;what are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortalsthat you care for them? (Ps 8: 1, 3-4)

In the story of creation from Genesis chapter one,

On day 1-

God said, “Let there be light”; and there was light. And God saw that the light was good; and God separated the light from the darkness. God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. (Gen 1:3-5)

On day 4-

God said, “Let there be lights in the dome of the sky to separate the day from the night; and let them be for signs and for seasons and for days and years, and let them be lights in the dome of the sky to give light upon the earth.” And it was so. God made the two great lights—the greater light to rule the day and the lesser light to rule the night—and the stars. God set them in the dome of the sky to give light upon the earth, to rule over the day and over the night, and to separate the light from the darkness. And God saw that it was good. (Gen 1:14-18)

I have missed the goodness of the sun and blue sky amid the gloominess of this winter’s weather than does not want to ever end! In the past two weeks I have been especially pleased when after snow flurries in April and overcast skies for days the sun finally broke out and shared with us the brightness of the sun’s rays.

Sunshine, blue sky, and the brilliance of color that emerge in spring are always for me signs of hope. When the grass begins to turn green, the trees begin to bud, the flowers begin to open and display their brilliant colors, and the crops begin to peak through the dirt, I look around at the wonder of nature and give thanks for God’s handiwork, God’s beautiful creation, which then turns my heart and mind to thanks for God’s assurances through resurrection faith and joy.

Today we continue to celebrate our resurrection faith as we continue in the season of Easter,

50 days which proclaim the good news of Easter as well as teaches us as disciples how to live as followers of a crucified and risen Savior and Lord.

Today we turn to part two in our Easter season celebration, moving from “Because He Lives” to the letter of 1 John, where we will spend the next four weeks until Pentecost.

Written about a decade after the Gospel of John, like many of the letters preserved in our New Testament 1 John speaks to the early Christian community as they struggle to be like-minded in their faith and understanding of Jesus. If we think we are the first generation of Christians who struggle to be of one mind as we seek to follow Christ, think again! Our cultural context is different. Our trials are different. Yet our struggles are strikingly similar to the early church.

Do we believe Jesus was fully divine and fully human? Do we believe that Jesus died for all our sins? Do we believe in sin? Do we talk the talk and walk the walk, living out in daily life what we say we believe?

Do we walk in the light of God—and what does that mean? This is what I want us to focus on today.

Psalm 27:1 asks the question: The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear? The Lord is the stronghold of my life; of whom shall I be afraid?

In John 8:12 Jesus responds: “I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life.”

Today, now we hear 1 John 1:5 declare: This is the message we have heard from him and proclaim to you, that God is light and in him there is no darkness at all. (NRSV)

This, in essence, is the message we heard from Christ and are passing on to you: God is light, pure light; there’s not a trace of darkness in him. (MSG)

As the sun is at the center of our universe, God desires to be the center of our lives. God is light, pure light, with no darkness in God. Yet how often in our lives, in the center of our lives, do we crowd God out with other priorities, other people, other things we worship. We may crowd God out with sports or work, with children or spouses, with leisure activities or addictions, with money or social status, with selfishness or pride.

Yet when we place other people and priorities at the center of our lives instead of God, it is like we are placing a cloud over the sun’s rays—we dim the light, we become surrounded by darkness. Sometimes like storm clouds, the darkness comes and goes quickly. At other times, however, the darkness hovers over us like darkness of a gloomy day.

The darkness that blots out the light of God in our lives is called sin. Sin is what everything that keeps us apart from a vibrant, trusting, ongoing relationship with God, through faith in God’s Son Jesus and trust in God’s Holy Spirit. Although we may not like to talk about it, although we may not like to name it, sin is always present in us and among us. For sin is everything we do that turns us away from God, and following God’s ways in our life.

The Greek term for sin is *harmatia*, which literally means missing the mark, like a marksman’s arrow that strays from the target. When I try my hand at archery that darkness is everywhere in front of and beyond the target, where my arrows often fall. If God is our target, sin takes us off center, away from God, and toward the darkness which surrounds where we are to be.

God knows our sins, even those we never want to admit aloud to ourselves, let alone to God or one another. God knows the impact of our sin, how our sins damage our relationships with one another, with God and with all creation. God knows our struggle with sin, the times we blatantly choose to sin and the times we strive not to sin and sin anyway.

God knows, yet loves us anyway. God knows, yet wants us to recognize sin for ourselves. God yearns for us to admit our sins and turn away from our sins in order to draw us into a shared life, an intimate fellowship, a close relationship with God and with one another.

..Once there were two rural church deacons having a sociable beer in the local tavern when they saw their minister drive by and take a good long look at their pickup trucks parked outside.   
One deacon ducked down and said, “I hope the reverend didn’t see us or recognize my pickup.”   
The other replied indifferently, “What difference does it make? God knows we’re in here ... and he’s the only one who counts.”

The first deacon answered, “Yeah, but God won’t tell my wife.”

--Homileticsonline.com 4-23-06

The preacher may or may not tell the wife, but the man knows his sin, God knows his sin, and as long as we continue to sin and as long as we continue to be in denial of the many ways we separate ourselves from God, then we will not live in a shared life with God or an honest life with one another. Sin, then, breaks our relationship with God by all the sins, the actions and attitudes that creep up in our lives and hurt our relationships not only with God but also with one another and all creation.

As we think about light today, ponder, for example, the light and air pollution that hurts our relationship with God’s creation.

In the city and the suburbs, we are surrounded by so many artificial street lights that we can barely see the wonder of the night sky and its brilliance of stars, or a meteor shower like we were scheduled to see this weekend. So we miss the beauty of the night sky, or take it for granted without ever seeing it.

The day after 9/11, when every plane in this country was grounded, I was amazed at how clear the sky was without any plane trails creating wispy clouds in the sky. At that time we lived in Payne, which was on the flight path for Ft Wayne Int’l Airport. I am amazed at how much our need for travel affects the clouds in the sky, even here and now!

Like clouds and artificial lights that cover the wonder of the sky and the stars, our sins cover up the goodness of God in our lives, the love of God reaching out to us, the forgiveness of God striving to cleanse us from all sin.

Romans 3:23 reminds us that we are all sinners in need of a savior:

“all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.”

Even after we say yes to Christ, because of our human nature, because we are not perfect, we will all still sin.

Everyday slip-ups happen, and we have to deal with the consequences for those actions. In a moment of weakness you lose your temper and yell at somebody. An attractive person catches your eye and suddenly images flash in your mind that should really only and ever be about your spouse. You eat a little more than you should, drink a little more than you should, tell a white lie (or a not-so-white lie) to make yourself look better. You deny going to church because it is easier than arguing with someone.

Every day we all will sin. Yet we are not called to stay in our sin. We are not called to blatantly sin. We are not called to love the darkness so much that we refuse to give up our sin. That is the type of sin our scripture is talking about today.

When we refuse to forgive. When we refuse to consider the experience of another. When we refuse to consider our own racist or sexist ways. When we act holier-than-thou, or hostile, because we believe we know the truth and condemn those who do not believe our way. When we act like social justice doesn’t matter. Or act like growing in our understanding of God’s word doesn’t matter. Or we dismiss the power of the Holy Spirit. There are many, many ways that we blatantly sin and continue to love the darkness, thus refusing to allow God’s light to shine within us.

In the letter of 1 John, our writer today is pretty blunt in his words about our love for darkness, our love for sin, even our love for evil. Although these words were written thousands of years ago, consider how relevant they still are today. From Eugene Peterson’s *The Message* translation, 1 John 6-10 says:

If we claim that we experience a shared life with him and continue to stumble around in the dark, we’re obviously lying through our teeth—we’re not *living* what we claim. But if we walk in the light, God himself being the light, we also experience a shared life with one another,

as the sacrificed blood of Jesus, God’s Son, purges all our sin. If we claim that we’re free of sin, we’re only fooling ourselves. A claim like that is errant nonsense. On the other hand, if we admit our sins—make a clean breast of them—he won’t let us down; he’ll be true to himself. He’ll forgive our sins and purge us of all wrongdoing. If we claim that we’ve never sinned, we out-and-out contradict God—make a liar out of him. A claim like that only shows off our ignorance of God. (MSG)

We are called to walk in the light of God.

When we walk in the light, we are honest with our sins and failures, confessing to God what we have done as well as what we have left undone, and then striving to move away from the darkness of sin in order to dwell in a deeper relationship with God.

When we walk in the light, we become transformed day by day and hour by hour into people who resemble God’s beloved Son Jesus, those who are forgiven and forgiving.

When we walk in the light, we grow in our shared life not only with God but also with one another in the body of Christ, the church. We intentionally journey with other believers, growing in our discipleship, our knowledge, our love and our service.

When we walk in the light, we then share the joy of that light with others, sharing our stories of God’s light in our lives, sharing our stories of Jesus’ forgiveness of our sins, sharing the stories of our transformation, sharing our stories of God’s light conquering the darkness.

Have you ever been in a darkened room, and seen firsthand the power of one light to dispel the darkness? It may be a nightlight, it may be a flashlight, it may be the flicker of one candle. Such light that dispels the darkness offers hope and comfort.

Never dismiss the power of one light, nor the power of one life. Our individual lives, our individual households, and our individual congregation can be beacons of God’s light and love to all we encounter on a daily basis. Consider the difference one person made in your faith life, whether preacher or teacher, friend or neighbor.

Oscar Cervantes was transformed by the light of God shared through the life of one person.

..As a child, Oscar began to get into trouble. Then as he got older, he was jailed 17 times for brutal crimes. Prison psychiatrists said he was beyond help. But they were wrong! During a brief interval of freedom, Oscar met an elderly man who told him about Jesus. He placed his trust in the Lord and was changed into a kind, caring man. Shortly afterward he started a prison ministry. Chaplain H. C. Warwick describes it this way:

“The third Saturday night of each month is ‘Oscar Night’ at Soledad [prison]. Inmates come to hear Oscar and they sing gospel songs with fervor; they sit intently for over 2 hours; they come freely to the chapel altar…. What professionals had failed to do for Oscar in years of counseling,

Christ’s Spirit did in a moment of conversion.”

-Adrian Dieleman, “Receive the Holy Spirit” preaching.com

Then when we begin to join in fellowship with others, to join with brothers and sisters, neighbors and friends throughout our community as well we around the world, imagine the brilliance of God’s light and love, hope and justice shining in our world today! What an image that is, to imagine the light of Christ radiating from his followers into every corner of the world, every country, city, town and village. What an image of a pure, holy, radiant light of love beaming across the world!

Some of you were active here in 2006 when the global United Methodist Church began *Imagine No Malaria*, which included the nationwide initiative called *Nothing But Nets*. In 2006 in Africa someone died every 30 seconds from malaria. Often those who died were women or children.

They died from this preventable disease due to lack of access to proper health care, prevention, and treatment.

Through *Imagine No Malaria* Christians came together to train local health care providers, educate mothers on sanitary water conditions, treat children of all ages, and provide bed nets to prevent mosquito bites. Together we helped to shine the light of Christ into the continent of Africa in such a way that between 2006 and 2016, the death rate from malaria dropped in half, to one death every 60 seconds!

While *Imagine No Malaria* continues, Christians have since also shone the light of Christ on the struggles of human trafficking, the heroin epidemic, and families split up by immigration arrests, just to name a few.

When we walk in the light, we live into the words proclaimed by Jesus in Matthew 5:

“You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid. No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.” (Mt 5:14-16)

As we leave here today, may we continue to ponder and follow the words of 1 John, to believe that God is light, to confess our sins and be cleansed by God’s light of love, and to share God’s light with others by declaring what we have seen and heard and experienced of God’s light and love and forgiveness and cleansing.

Then, may our job be complete, the joy of knowing and sharing Jesus!

May it be so. Let us pray.