

Shine: 2. Overcoming evil
Romans 12:14-21; Matthew 2:13-16
December 10, 2017
Pastor Steve Richards

We've reached the midpoint in this season of Advent. Just two weeks to go, and I wonder: Are we preparing for Christmas or are we preparing for Jesus? They are not the same. Last week, Amanda and I attended a Christmas concert. Near the end of the concert there was a short seven minute message about the season, and as the person concluded the talk someone seated behind me asked, "Where's Jesus?" Because there was no mention of Jesus. The church was beautifully decorated. The music was performed well. The program advertised a Christmas program – just not much Jesus.

It is easy to focus in on the season and forget the reason. Have you noticed the distracting ways the world lifts up Christmas? We can get busy setting up our Nativity scenes and forget there is a baby inside. That's where the light shines. We still need that light to shine. We still need Jesus in our world, because it seems the darkness is everywhere. One natural disaster after another - hurricanes, floods, now fires – all of them leading to human suffering. There is so much that compassion fatigue sets in. Not another special offering – when will it end? It's been another year where racial tensions have erupted in violence. And we've learned a new term in this country - "active shooter" – and now schools and businesses have drills to prepare and even churches are developing security plans. There is darkness. At the heart of that darkness, there is evil. And it is important for us to remember that this is the season when God reveals himself as one who does not exempt himself from pain and suffering but submits himself to it.

The gospels of Matthew and Luke give us the Christmas story. At the heart of the Christmas story in Matthew's gospel is a baby who poses such a threat to the most powerful man in that part of the world that he kills a whole village full of other babies in an effort to get rid of him. At the heart of Luke's Christmas story is a baby who if only the Roman emperor knew it would be the Lord and Savior of the whole world – titles the emperor used for himself – and a threat to his power. Within a generation, Jesus' followers will be persecuted by the Empire that sees them as threat to the world order. It may not be what we remember each December, but people found Jesus to be a threat. He upset the powerful and suffered the usual fate of people who do that. His story nearly ends before he reaches two years of age. Jesus was born with a price on his head. Angels warn Joseph and he and Mary and Jesus escape from Bethlehem just as Herod the Great who thought nothing of killing members of his own family, who gave orders when dying that the leading citizens of Jericho be slaughtered so people would weep at his funeral. This Herod did not hesitate to order the killing of lots of babies in case one of them should grow up to be a threat to his authority. This was a time and place of trouble, tension, violence and fear. This was not the peaceful Christmas scene that works well on a Hallmark card. There was darkness – and evil seemed to have the upper hand.

Matthew wants us to see Jesus when things are at their darkest. That's when we need the light. When the light shines, we see what we cannot see in the dark. It's why we turn on headlights when we are driving – to see and be seen. It's why we take a flashlight with us. It's why we light a candle when the electricity shuts off. It's also why you make an appointment to see your doctor. Something is not right and you want someone to see what you cannot see.

A few weeks ago, I signed up for an exercise class. Just exercising on my own wasn't working – I'd step on the scale or checking my blood pressure – it's like turning on the light – and what I saw wasn't pretty, so I signed up for the class – 6:15 in the morning. I looked around and by

looking at the people around me, either they didn't really need to be there or my hope was that I might one day look like them if I kept attending the class. I looked around and I was the one not like all the others! And part way through the class, the instructor came up to me and with a smile said, "You will hate me tomorrow." And I said, "I hate you already!" I'm trying to let the light shine in my darkness. And the light doesn't mean things get easier. There are times when I've been in a restaurant at night, the lights are dim and I've wondered what the room might look like if we turned on the lights. I might see things that are hidden in the dark, that I'd rather not know are there. It's often easier to remain in the dark. Turn on the light and we've got to face change. For weeks now, sexual harassment has been in the news and some famous and powerful men have fallen – and not because sexual harassment is something new. I suspect there is not a woman (and to be fair, some men) who hasn't been on the receiving end of a comment, an offensive joke, and unwelcome touch or stare or outright assault. What we are seeing in the news is not New, but the light has been turned on – and will we wait for the darkness to return or will we let what we see in the light change us? Will we let the light shine in all of our lives until there is no darkness.

Matthew tells us that Jesus is Emmanuel – God with us. The light shines in our lives right where the pain is. Herod puts out an edict to murder all the baby boys two years and under – and the light shines on that which is evil in this world. And what is our response to what we see in the light? Paul tells us: **Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everyone. If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone.** I can't change other people's behavior, but I can change me. When the light shines in my life, what needs to be changed? Will I stand up to the evil of this world? Will I hold myself and ask others to hold me accountable? **Do not take revenge...** Paul is saying revenge is not an option for those who follow Jesus. It may feel satisfying when we see the mighty have fallen – and they hurt where we hurt. Instead, we must find another way. Revenge keeps fueling the evil, and unless the cycle is broken, it never ends. When evil was at its worst, God came and took its full weight on himself, opening a new way. He overcame the evil that put him on a cross with the power of his own life and love.

Paul does not say we are to go easy on evil. Evil is real and it seeks to hurt and destroy. God made this world and called it good and everything that defaces and distorts, damages and destroys what God has made is evil. So what do we do? Turning to the book of Proverbs, Paul says: **If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink. In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head.** Not literally! To heap burning coals does not mean destroy but purify – burn away that which is evil. It's what John the Baptist meant when he said, When Jesus comes, he will baptize with the Holy Spirit and with fire. There is a process of purification when the light shines. **Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.** Let the light shine.

I have the privilege most mornings to be able to walk into our child care center. Bloom Early Learning and Child Care exists to overcome the darkness. Let me share one story of a child that came to Bloom this fall. Her mom grew up in the Plymouth area and moved to Costa Rica to teach. She had this heart and desire to help others. While there she met a man, they fell in love and got married. They had two children together. Life seemed complete until the day she discovered her husband was abusing their children. It's the kind of evil we read about but never imagine will happen in our family. But her husband is Costa Rican and she is not. The children are also Costa Rican. She turned to the US Embassy to help her get full rights to her children and bring them to Minnesota. She found housing, enrolled the older child in elementary school – and eventually found Bloom. It wasn't the first child care she tried but Bloom exists, not just to provide child care but to provide a safe, stable, loving environment to heal and to grow. The child had regressed developmentally. Evil will do that to a child. But in the short time, this child

has been at Bloom she is frankly starting to Bloom – to overcome the darkness. Because of the scholarship you have provided, the mom has been able to find employment. Their journey continues. It will take time to fully heal and overcome what they've experienced, but you have provided the space where the light could shine through.

Next Sunday night, we begin the first of five Christmas services. At each, we will receive an offering for Jesus. A few years ago, we looked at Christmas and realized it's actually Jesus' birthday. What if everybody showed up for your birthday party and gave gifts to each other but left you out? Are we preparing for Christmas or are we preparing for Jesus? So our Christmas offering doesn't go to us. It goes to the work of Jesus in this world. Half will provide scholarships at Bloom and the other half will support relief efforts in Puerto Rico. We plan to assemble 5000 health kits to send to Puerto Rico. Maybe you saw the news this week that the death toll has been revised and more than a thousand have died at a result of Hurricane Maria. Much of the island is still without electricity. We've decided to help this community help the people of Puerto Rico. Jesus said, "You are the light of the world." On January 15, the day we celebrate Martin Luther King Jr., we have reserved Medina Ballroom from 5:00-7:00 and hope you will invite others to come and be the light in the midst of the darkness that still exists in Puerto Rico. And your giving to the Christmas offering will provide the supplies to make that happen.

Last Wednesday was St. Nicholas Day. Do you know the story of St. Nicholas? Nicholas was orphaned at a young age when his parents died during an epidemic. Left with a generous estate, he dedicated his life to God and sought to anonymously give away his estate to help others in need. Learning that a family was so destitute that he father was contemplating selling his daughters into slavery, Nicholas placed some gold coins in a stocking and tossed it down the chimney to help the family through their financial difficulties. (Hence the tradition of placing Christmas stockings by the chimney.) During the rule of Roman Emperor Diocletian who ruthlessly persecuted Christians, Nicholas was imprisoned for his faith, repeatedly tortured and starved. While imprisoned, Nicholas ministered to his fellow prisoners. He led prayer and worship services and smuggled letters in and out of prison. In 313 AD, Constantine come to power and granted religious freedom to Christians. Nicholas, still a young man, looked incredibly old with his white hair and beard when he was released from prison. While some urged violent retaliation against the enemies of the faith, Nicholas demanded that they forgive and seek reconciliation. Upon his death, December 6, 346AD, his hometown of Myra led a torchlight procession through the village to honor their beloved bishop. Unfortunately, 1700 years later St. Nick has become associated more with presents with a "t" than presence with a "c".

So again, I wonder: Are we preparing for Christmas or are we preparing for Jesus? This little light of mine, that entered the world 2000 years ago, I'm going to let it shine in me and through me this Christmas.

Grow, Pray, Study for Week of December 10, 2017

Weekly Prayer: God of life and light, as we make preparations for Christmas, help us to be mindful that we prepare for you. Beyond the tinsel and shopping, may we find the light, life and glory that Jesus offers us. Thank you for coming as light into our darkened world. Amen.

Monday, December 11

Scripture: Psalm 130:1-8

Out of the depths I cry to you, LORD; Lord, hear my voice. Let your ears be attentive to my cry for mercy. If you, LORD, kept a record of sins, Lord, who could stand? But with you there is forgiveness, so that we can, with reverence, serve you. I wait for the LORD, my whole being waits, and in his word I put my hope. I wait for the Lord more than watchmen wait for the morning, more than watchmen wait for the morning. Israel, put your hope in the LORD, for with the LORD is unfailing love and with him is full redemption. He himself will redeem Israel from all their sins.

Observation: In Psalm 130, the psalmist said he was crying “out of the depths.” The CEB Study Bible said, “The term describes the destructive forces that diminish life and confront people with deadly threats.” Yet even in a time like that, he wrote, “I hope, Lord....I wait for God’s promise. My whole being waits for my Lord” (verses 5-6). This resilient, persistent hope can overcome the darkness. It’s the reason we light the Advent candles each Sunday this month.

Application: In verse 6, the psalmist repeated for emphasis the image of a watchman in a dark, dark night (there were no streetlights!) waiting, hoping, for the morning. Then he said, “Israel, wait for the Lord!” (verse 7) A spiritually dark world waited for the arrival of God’s light. And the hope of a Redeemer was not empty—Jesus’ birth made that hope a reality. Where do you see “darkness” in your life? How can you mentally “change the channel” so that the light can overcome the darkness?

Prayer: O God, you know I don’t like to wait. I wish you would fix everything right now! This Advent season, remind me that waiting for you and preparing my heart is the way to the good life you have for me. Amen.

Tuesday, December 12

Scripture: Isaiah 40:1-5, 27-31

Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and proclaim to her that her hard service has been completed, that her sin has been paid for, that she has received from the LORD’s hand double for all her sins. A voice of one calling: “In the wilderness prepare the way for the LORD; make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be raised up, every mountain and hill made low; the rough ground shall become level, the rugged places a plain. And the glory of the LORD will be revealed, and all people will see it together. For the mouth of the LORD has spoken.”

Why do you complain, Jacob? Why do you say, Israel, “My way is hidden from the LORD; my cause is disregarded by my God”? Do you not know? Have you not heard? The LORD is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. He will not grow tired or weary, and his understanding no one can fathom. He gives strength to the weary and increases the power of the weak. Even youths grow tired and weary, and young men stumble and fall; but those who hope in the LORD will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not be faint.

Observation: Isaiah 40 offered hope to Hebrews returning from exile in Babylon, speaking words of comfort and divine promise. Because God had never abandoned them, even in the days that felt the most painful and desolate, they could always keep hoping. God is in the

business of “giving power to the tired and reviving the exhausted.” The light overcomes the darkness! That’s a promise we need as much as the Israelites did.

Application: Today’s passage addressed the weary, doubtful complaint of the Israelites in exile: “My way is hidden from the Lord, my God ignores my predicament.” In what parts of your life do you struggle with a sense that God ignores your concerns and predicaments? On what did the prophet say you can focus to renew your hope and strength?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, on so many days it seems as though my steps falter, and I’m tempted to give up. I need your strength and hope—thank you for the promise that they are always there. Amen.

Wednesday, December 13

Scripture: Isaiah 55:6-13

Seek the LORD while he may be found; call on him while he is near. Let the wicked forsake their ways and the unrighteous their thoughts. Let them turn to the LORD, and he will have mercy on them, and to our God, for he will freely pardon. “For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways,” declares the LORD. “As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts. As the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return to it without watering the earth and making it bud and flourish, so that it yields seed for the sower and bread for the eater, so is my word that goes out from my mouth: It will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it. You will go out in joy and be led forth in peace; the mountains and hills will burst into song before you, and all the trees of the field will clap their hands. Instead of the thornbush will grow the juniper, and instead of briars the myrtle will grow. This will be for the LORD’s renown, for an everlasting sign, that will endure forever.”

Observation: Two chapters earlier, Isaiah 52:13-53:12 declared that the person God called “my servant” would conquer evil, not by brute force, but by taking all of evil’s worst upon himself, absorbing and destroying its power to lastingly hurt others. Chapter 55 built on that, telling readers that God’s superbly merciful acts are very different from our usual human patterns. As we choose to respond to God’s mercy, we join in a cosmic celebration.

Application: How does Isaiah’s description of the gap between God’s mercy and our usual human ways of relating speak to your heart? Sometimes when we read Isaiah’s words or Jesus’ teaching about loving enemies, we might think, “Sounds nice—but it would never work.” Are you convinced that God’s ways are indeed higher than ours? Do you believe God’s way is the only path to ultimate peace and good, or just hopelessly naive idealism?

Prayer: Lord, did your servants 500 years before Christ read these words and think, “Just how will that work?” I know more about the story of Jesus, but it still contains a lot of wonder and mystery. Thank you for the story and the promise of your saving work for me. Amen.

Thursday, December 14

Scripture: Matthew 2:13-16

When they had gone, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream. “Get up,” he said, “take the child and his mother and escape to Egypt. Stay there until I tell you, for Herod is going to search for the child to kill him.” So he got up, took the child and his mother during the night

and left for Egypt, where he stayed until the death of Herod. And so was fulfilled what the Lord had said through the prophet: "Out of Egypt I called my son." When Herod realized that he had been outwitted by the Magi, he was furious, and he gave orders to kill all the boys in Bethlehem and its vicinity who were two years old and under, in accordance with the time he had learned from the Magi.

Observation: What sometimes gets lost in the retelling of the Christmas story is how turbulent the times were. Jesus was born into a world where his life was at risk. His survival was dependent on Joseph who listened to God and then took his family into exile. Under the cover of darkness, they made a rugged and hurried journey through the desert with an infant. They became refugees.

Application: Even in the middle of evil there is hope! Where do you see hope in your community or in the world? How can you continue to find the inner strength and courage to carry the light of Jesus into the world's darkness? How might you take a step in this season to bring that light into the darkness?

Prayer: Lord God, in the birth of Jesus, you have shown us that light and hope overcome evil. Help me to hear your voice and to know that you are with me even when I feel the darkness. Amen.

Friday, December 15

Scripture: Romans 12:17-21

Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everyone. If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone. Do not take revenge, my dear friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: "It is mine to avenge; I will repay," says the Lord. On the contrary: "If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink. In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head." Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

Observation: Paul instructed the Christians in Rome that their conduct should never betray the high moral standards of the gospel, or it would provoke the disdain of unbelievers and bring the gospel into disrepute. Instead of trying to take revenge, doing good to one's enemy may bring about his or her repentance. God works through people, just like you, to overcome evil. That's how the light shines in the darkness.

Application: Do good and resist evil! When have you been tempted to repay evil with evil? How is God challenging you to do good in the face of evil in the world?

Prayer: God, thank you for the witness of the apostle Paul who stood against evil by remaining faithful to you. Grant me the inner strength and confidence to do good to all in all places of my life. Amen.

Saturday, December 16

Scripture: John 1:1-5

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made

that has been made. In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.

Observation: Boldly and creatively, the prologue to John's gospel brought together the worlds of Greek and Hebrew thought. Greek thinkers saw "the Word" (*logos*) as the force that directed the universe. Writers like Philo often personified "the logos" as the world's guiding force. In Hebrew thought, Genesis 1 said God created by speaking (cf. Psalm 33:6), and Proverbs 8:12, 22-31 said "Wisdom" was with God at creation. Yes, said John—coming to us out of the mysterious mists of eternity, the Word (Jesus—cf. John 1:14) embodied all that power, wisdom and light.

Application: "The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness doesn't extinguish the light" (verse 5). God did not shun our darkened world, but came to live here—and in this world, Jesus' life created new life and light for all who trusted in him. Have there been times when it seemed that darkness was trying to put out God's light in your life? What spiritual practices keep you growing closer to God, so that God's light keeps shining more and more brightly for you?

Prayer: God of life and light, beyond the tinsel and shopping, may we find the light, life and glory that Jesus offers us. Thank you for coming as light into our darkened world. Amen.