

Column

Many years ago, before I went to theological college, I drove an Episcopal clergyman to a country church where he was to conduct an evening service. On the way we discussed darkness. Darkness, after all, was the reason I was his driver, as he could not see to drive at night.

Night, he observed, was a very fearful thing a generation or so earlier, and indeed going all the way back to the dawn of time. Before electricity and motorized cars, if someone became ill at night or if a woman went into childbirth, seeking help was difficult, especially for those living in rural areas. People often died at night. Often, going for help had to wait for morning. Night, therefore, held terror.

If you think about it, something similar was true for the human race prior to the coming of Christ. This was especially true for those outside of God's covenant family. How could they know where they came from, why they were here and where they were going after death (which was always near at hand).

More than that, where did they turn in times trouble, sickness and death? In response, many crafted gods made of wood and stone, but these so-called gods could never meet the deepest needs of the human soul. They brought no light. In the words of the psalmist, they had eyes that did not see and ears that did not hear. All of which to say, the ancient world awaited sunrise.

I am not suggesting that those outside God's covenant family had no light. Creation itself proclaims the Maker of the stars and sun. Paul says as much in Romans 1:20 when he writes: "For the invisible things of him from the creation of the world are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made . . ."

Also, as many writers both ancient and modern have affirmed, people everywhere have an inner light of conscience. There is such a

thing as “natural law.” Natural law is the instinctive knowledge that some things are right while others are wrong. An example C.S. Lewis uses in his book *Mere Christianity* is someone shoving in front of people standing in line. No matter in what culture you find yourself or how old you are, in such a situation, those waiting their turn will say, “That’s not fair.”

But even with the witness of creation and the built-in voice of conscience, there was much darkness in the ancient world. But with the coming of Christ, that changed. “The hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight” we sing at Christmas time in Phillip Brooks’ familiar Christmas carol. John in his prologue proclaims the same truth: “In him was life; and the life was the light of men.”

What about darkness today? Is it still with us? Indeed it is. Some still prefer darkness to light in the sense they don’t want to let go of their autonomy. So they give themselves over, they worship, those things that are passing away. In so doing they make a pact with death and make darkness their eternal companion.

But, what about those who do give their allegiance to Jesus? According to 1 Peter 2:9, they are called out of darkness into God’s marvelous light, but even they – all of us -- must be on guard against being sucked back into the vortex of darkness. Just this week, I read about a Christian broadcaster and apologist to whom this happened.

What precipitated this tragedy? One of his colleagues seems to have pinpointed it when she said: “He stopped praying.” She and others noticed that he no longer came to and participated in their morning prayer services. He just breezed in and did his news and commentary shows and left, she said. She noticed the change beginning then.

What we might take away from this man’s downfall is that darkness is not far away from any of us. Praying pulls back the curtains

and lets God's light into our lives. Not praying equals closing the curtains. Resolve to keep the curtains open in 2024.

LIGHTEN our darkness, we beseech thee, O Lord; and by thy great mercy defend us from all perils and dangers of this night; for the love of thy only Son, our Saviour, Jesus Christ. Amen. (The Book of Common Prayer)

The Rev. Victor H. Morgan is rector of St. Luke's Episcopal Church, Blue Ridge.