

My son Nathan and I had started out on a very challenging, snowshoeing/camping trip in the White Mountains. We planned to go up a mountain, hike and camp along a ridge top over several others for 4 days. But it was much colder than we'd expected, so at the end of the 1st day, the thought of putting up a tent, cooking and sleeping outside, had no appeal. But as we reached the top, resigned to a night in the cold, we saw, almost buried in snow, a cabin, with a sign, "Property of the Boy Scouts. Open to all. Leave it cleaner than you found it." We went inside and found a wood-stove, table, chairs, and bunks. We moved in, cooked supper, watched the sun set, and slept, toasty warm.

We enjoyed the next few days snowshoeing out on the ridge top, eating lunch at various overlooks, and coming back to a warm supper, warm bed, and warm sunset.

But then, on the 3rd night, we heard voices on the porch, some local youths had hiked up, expecting to use the cabin. Though we weren't really eager to share our cozy retreat, we welcomed them in. As they prepared their supper, talking loudly and drinking lots of booze, Nathan and I retreated to the bunkroom. Then, after they'd eaten, I smelled something I hadn't had a whiff of since the rock concerts of my youth – pot! So, though it was midnight, we decided to leave. After packing up, we told them we were going. "Hey, sorry if we made it too crowded for you," they said. "Don't worry; we've had 3 great days," I responded." And out we went, into the dark.

Dark, below zero, and 6 miles to the car! But the darkness worried us most. Darkness can be scary. It made us wonder if we'd be able to find our way, so far, in such cold. But we hadn't realized what a full moon could do. Its light, shining on the snow, made it easy to see. And what we saw was absolutely beautiful. Everything glistened. Light made all the difference. We ended up being glad we'd left.

How different it was coming down another mountain, Mt. Whitney, years later. Though we'd started out before dawn, the 22 mile round trip, 6,200 foot elevation gain, and slow going at the top, meant that darkness fell before we got back, thankfully, after we'd gotten past the drop-offs and ledges. Because this time there was no moon! So it was dark, pitch black. Couldn't see your hand in front of your face! No way we could have made it without headlamps! Even then, taking baby steps, we stumbled.

Darkness! Darkness is powerful, incapacitating. You can get lost in it, hurt, or killed. You wouldn't think anybody would prefer darkness to light.

That's also why it's so striking that Jesus says, "This is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light."

Strange that he says this right after sharing the great good news with Nicodemus, "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son." God didn't send his Son in the world to condemn it, but to save it.

Can there be any better news than that God loves the world, doesn't want to condemn it, but to save it? God wants to save the world by giving us Jesus, who comes in love, not to condemn or punish us for our sin, but to help us see it, admit it, turn from it, and live a new way - for God and others. God's light has dawned upon us in Jesus! That's the good news!

Yet Jesus also proclaims the sad truth that though the light has come into the world, people loved the darkness rather than the light.

Why? If we've been lost in the darkness, not able to see which way to go, stumbling, falling, going the wrong way, why wouldn't we run to the light? Why do we love the darkness rather than the light?

Well, the Genesis story of our first sin says that it's because we misunderstand God in two ways. First, when the serpent tells the people that they'll be like God if they eat the forbidden fruit, they think "like God" means lifted up, powerful, able to do whatever you want. Then, after eating the fruit, they misunderstand in another way. They know God's said bad things will happen if they eat it, but they don't see that besides setting boundaries and expecting obedience, God's also gracious, merciful, forgiving. Not knowing God's gracious side, they try to hide not only their sin from God, but themselves.

That's what we do! We want to be able to do whatever we want, and so we do- whatever we want. Then, when we do, we don't trust God's love, grace, and mercy so we try to hide our sin - not only from God but ourselves. When we do, we give sin even more power. Sin is a mistake, maybe a bad, selfish, or cruel mistake, but only a mistake. But when we try to hide it, try to "keep it in the dark" so no one - person, God, or we ourselves - can see it, it gains power. It gains power because, when we refuse to recognize a sin, we're more apt to do it, again and again, and get used to it. So, we have more and more to hide, to keep in the dark. And the sin and the hiding, come to possess us, become more than the sin of a mistake, become a power that takes control, become what the Bible calls evil.

That's why when Jesus says, "This is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than the light," he also adds, "because their deeds were evil." People prefer the darkness because they want to hide in it. They don't trust God's mercy, and so they're afraid of "the light" revealing their sin. They can't believe that if they'd only confess it and try to turn from it, they'd be forgiven. So, they stay in the darkness, fearfully resisting, resenting, and trying to put out the light.

Jesus is saying that it's our bondage to evil that makes us love the darkness and fear the light. That means we can't receive the light he brings unless we're honest about how bad things can be between us and God. Remember! Our relationship with Jesus didn't end with our proclaiming him as a great teacher and friend, but with our condemning him as a common criminal and sentencing him to a horrible death. How can we deny that we love the dark!

Though Jesus brought us the light and called us to live in it, something deep in us hides from it and flees into the dark. In order to receive the light he brings, we've got to admit our weakness, our sin, turn a searchlight on our lives and admit the truth - we love darkness rather than light - because we want to hide our sin. That honest confession is the first step toward being freed from captivity to evil, toward moving from the darkness into the light. We can't avoid it or skip over it.

We try to avoid it by making Jesus a one-dimensional, inclusive, accepting, affirming, feel-good, "nice guy." But if that's all he is, why did we end up nailing him to the cross? He got there, not for being "nice" and making us feel good about ourselves, but by telling us the truth about our sin, for calling us "white washed tombs," hypocrites, and worse, and for barging into the hiding place we'd made in the dark, shining his light on our sin, and refusing to let us hide it, anymore.

Truth is, we've tried - scripture be damned - to produce a permissive, user-friendly Jesus. How else could we come out of history's most bloody century, begin a new one with more wars, unbridled greed, and the continued plundering of creation, and still try to "sell" him as Mr. Affirmation? How else could we insist on seeing ourselves, as good, kind, loving, folk who've put sin behind us?

Yet, we stubbornly want to use Jesus to deny or ignore the reality of sin. We just want to share good news! But we lose everything when that's all we do. We lose what the good news is about. The good news is that the light shines in the darkness. It doesn't mean much if you deny there's any darkness

A pastor asked a recovering alcoholic, "Why've you stopped going to church?" He said, "After you've been to AA, had to stare your demons in the face, stand in front of 20 other drunks and tell every bad thing you've done, and ask for forgiveness, well, church just seems like a trivial waste of time."

A "trivial waste of time," that's what all this is if we refuse to look at the darkness and recognize the reality of our sin. Church, for sure, is about more than sin, but, by the grace of God, it shouldn't be less than that. Somehow the light of Christ, shining on us, must expose our love of the darkness.

When we refuse to look at the darkness and how at home we can be in it, we play in to the hands of the evil one. As C. S. Lewis noted, "It is the policy of the Devil to persuade us that there is no Devil." It is a sure sign of a compromised church – a church that's retired from the battle with evil - when a church stops dealing with sin.

Part of the church's ministry is to teach us that we're sinners, not to hammer us, or make us feel bad, but to help us not be afraid to admit it. Strange as it seems, the gospel story that we're forgiven-being-redeemed sinners is what gives us hope of being honest about the reality of the evil that can possess us.

Our only hope of seeing our sin truthfully yet without despair is to know a God who's both truthful and gracious. Jesus has shown us that God, by being the light that the darkness can't overcome.

Yet his light doesn't mean a thing if we don't recognize how much we need it, how dark it is without it. The problem is that we see our lives through a set of lies about ourselves, lies we're constantly trying to get not only others but ourselves to believe, so we never get a true picture of ourselves and others.

Our hope is that through Jesus' truth and grace, we'll find the courage to see ourselves truthfully and recognize our sin and evil. His cross can help us do that; it shows us the depth of our sin, and the power of evil to possess us. But it also shows the fullness of his love and graciousness. And his cross and resurrection show the resourcefulness and love of a God who's determined to save us.

Because of God's strange love for sinners, it's possible to confess our sin and still live in faith, hope, and love, knowing that even in our sin we're "more than conquerors through him who loved us."

We don't have to be afraid to recognize, own, and confess our sin, nor the awesome, possessive power of the darkness, because we know that "God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten son."

We know what God has done in Jesus to seek and to save sinners.

The good news is: God loves the world, loves it too much to let our darkness put out the light. The light shines in our darkness. The darkness will not overcome it! The light will bring us home!

Lord Jesus Christ, who in love came to us, who in love embraced us, and who in love died for us,
...give us a strong dose of honesty and truthfulness about our true situation before you.

You came to us in love and we rejected your love.

Yet even when we turned away from you, you did not turn away from us.

Lord, our only hope in life and in death is that you will continue to love us despite our sin.

Let your light shine into our darkness, penetrating every dark corner of our lives, shining upon us,

...within us, so that we might be enlightened by the light of your saving, sacrificial love,

...so that our night of sin might be transformed into your glorious day.

O God, we thank you that you are not like us –

...who often measure mercy in small amounts

...or create a vision of the nature of love according to our own miserable dimensions.

We thank you that your kindness stretches forever and that, in Christ, you have walked in our shoes,

...so that nothing we experience is ever a shock to you.

We thank you that you do not turn your face from us but touch our lives with rays of joy.

Holy Spirit, we pray for those too timid to seek Jesus.

We pray for those who want to serve Jesus, but worry about what their neighbors will think.

We pray for those who proclaim Jesus as Lord but shrink from true discipleship

...and remain content with a faith based on words.

We pray for those who struggle to understand the words of Jesus and fear to seek clarification.

We pray for ourselves.

Help us to recognize the darkness within and around us, to name it,

...and turn to the light that comes in Jesus.

Holy God, we pray for those known to us personally, to have special needs.

We pray for...