

**Sermon by The Rev. Deacon Ann Fritschner**

**22 March 2009**

**Numbers 21:4-9**

**Psalm 107:1-3, 17-22**

**Ephesians 2:1-10**

**John 3:14-21**

“Getting to Know me”

I am from Louisville KY, and Louisvillians consider themselves Southerners only when it suits. When I lived in Connecticut for 20 years I felt like a southerner, and when I moved to Hendersonville 15 years ago I felt like a flaming New England liberal. I could not figure out why there were churches where there should have been liquor stores, and then I couldn't find the liquor stores at all. I thought ABC stores were for teachers looking for supplies.

My earliest memories of “Moving back to the South for the first time” are very clear; on one of my first days I was stopped at a light and the truck across the intersection from me had a front license plate that read “We don't care how you did it up north”.

And I remember that every other car and truck had a bumper sticker on it that declared; John 3 or John 3: 16. Well I was Episcopal enough to know that this was a reference to the Bible and Episcopal enough not to know what the passage was. ‘For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.’ This declaration can be difficult to accept because we do not feel worthy of it and because know what happens to the gift of the son.

I can better relate to other words in today's John and Ephesians passages;

“...and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil. For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed...All of us once lived among them in the passions of our flesh, following the desires of flesh and senses, and we were by nature children of wrath, like everyone else.”

I have lived some of my life in the darkness – maybe you have too. Shame, guilt and fear can keep us trapped in the darkness – even if we long for the light. We can watch ourselves doing something we do not want to do and cannot save ourselves from the shame of doing it – we abhor our selves and yet cannot seem to stop or to change. We even deny the action or inaction to others while dying inside because we have been caught in our own lies. When someone else focuses light on us we shrink in it while silently crying out, “Please help me.”

But fortunately for me and those who can relate to what I am saying, God does not wait for us to become perfect before coming into our lives. God overcomes our sense of shame or guilt or unworthiness, comes into our lives anyway, and brings the gift of grace which is the process we use to accept Christ's love for us.

God loves us, just as we are – ashes and dust -humans full of ourselves, our pride, our limitations. Yet God loves us enough to sacrifice the purest being he has created, his only son, his beloved, *not to indict us* but to give us a partner on earth – to give us a real person in the flesh with whom we can share our human experience --- someone to love us as a real human, someone who understands.

God could have given us money or oil or perfect health or other tempting and temporal gifts – instead God gives the gift that was most precious to him the giver. He gives the one gift that cannot be replaced and that will never cease – he gives us the light of Christ in the personhood of Jesus so that we may feel loved, *as a human can only love another human*, so we can have an intimate friend who will be with us always. God did not promise us sunny days and sweet dreams – he promised that when we felt the worst about ourselves, hopeless, helpless, ashamed, sad and defeated, we would always have an ally who understood what it is like to be human, to be broken by the world.

We will never be alone, no matter what we have done, been or thought. And feeling unworthy no longer is a reason to remain in the darkness. We are given the companion in Jesus as well as the miracle grow of grace to move out towards the light.

Are you living in the light of God, joyous, happy and free? Or are you living in the shadows of your fear and shame, hiding from God and yourself. When you awake at 3 am and can't get back to sleep, do you feel free to accept God's abundant, extravagant, enduring, unceasing love? Or do you reject it because you are not worthy of it – undeserving? Are there walls between you and God that keep you from accepting the pure love of God? Are you bound to heaven or to earth?

Lent is time of honesty and purity – the time to admit that we are not God and to give thanks that God is. It is a season that provides us an opportunity to reflect where the darkness or shadows still lurk in our lives, our souls, our behaviors, and to ask for help.

It is a time to make a formal confession of specific behaviors or actions that we want to let go of and have their burdensome weight removed from us. It is a time to let Christ's light into our lives in a new way - and accepting forgiveness feels freer and lighter than if we have never had sins.

Lent is a time to allow God's radiant light to burn away our sins so that Christ's light can shine through us to touch others - to become more compassionate towards those still in the shadows. We become able to offer ourselves as a bridge for those too afraid to walk by themselves; to help others as we have been helped. We move out from ourselves toward our neighbors, and we do it in the name of God. Our acts are no longer done to glorify ourselves but our God.

The days are becoming lighter longer, but we were getting closer and closer to the darkness of Good Friday. As painful as Good Friday is, we cannot avoid it if we want to celebrate the freedom of Easter. We must not only acknowledge but partake in the darkness in order to appreciate the supreme light of Easter. God from God, light from

light, true god from true god: God's love and light always triumph over the darkness of sin and brokenness.

We will sing the words – 'the light of Christ – thanks be to God' at the Easter Vigil to remind ourselves that Jesus is our partner and constant companion, even if we stray from him, and that we are always invited to re-turn towards the light of Christ that we may be Christ's light to others still in worldly darkness.

So the next time you see a John 3 bumper sticker know that it is a love arrow from God reaffirming how much you are loved– just as you are, broken and sinful, wanting to do and be better, and gracefully rejoice as you accept God's extravagant love and invitation to live in the light.

Amen.