

Third Sunday After the Epiphany – 2023

Life Sunday

Isaiah 9:1-4

1 Corinthians 1:10-18

Matthew 4:12-25

Are Lutherans naïve? Oh, Pastor! Say it isn't so! It's true, being naïve is not a virtue. I don't believe that our Lord builds empty-headed disciples, folks who lack discernment, who aren't capable of defending the truth, who jeopardize the spiritual well-being of those under their care. There is a spiritual battle going on all around us. St. Paul wrote this: "For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places" (Ephesians 6:12). Do you believe that? Is it true? St. Peter wrote this: "Be sober-minded; be watchful. Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion seeking someone to devour" (1 Peter 5:8). Is that true? Do you believe it?

Was Pinocchio a Lutheran? The quintessential naïf, Pinocchio should be remembered for much more than lying. A con artist named Honest John would sell Pinocchio down the river five different ways. Genuinely evil, this fox tries to swindle Pinocchio out of his life. Jiminy Cricket, the eyes and ears of wisdom for the puppet who has none, puts it to ole Pinoke real simple-like. "Remember what I said about temptation? Well, that's him." The naïve marionette then said something that is being said an awful lot today: "Oh, no, Jiminy, that's Mr. Honest John." Really? Honest John sells Pinocchio to Stromboli, a demonic puppeteer, who locks Pinoke in a cage. Next, Honest John tells Pinocchio that he is "allergic" and needs a vacation to Pleasure Island where our wooden hero is nearly turned into a real jackass.

In the olden days, poison had a skull and cross-bones emblem emblazoned on the bottle. It was a warning. Death was inside the bottle. Ingest it and discover rather quickly how accurate the warning was. Vain philosophy doesn't come with warning labels. Today, the sick are promulgating diseased ideas. Again, St. Paul was super direct. "For many, of whom I have often told you and now tell you even with tears, walk as enemies of the cross of Christ. Their end is destruction, their god is their belly, and they glory in their shame, with minds set on earthly things" (Philippians 3:18-19). "See to it that no one takes you captive by philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the world, and not according to Christ" (Colossians 2:8). Satan wants to swindle you out of your life. He has no conscience, no compunction about his lies, no compunction about actively using the naïve to advance his realm of darkness. He masquerades as an angel of light but Satan is pure evil, pure darkness, a lover of death (2 Corinthians 11:14).

Abortion has been marketed as a solution, as a human right, as a matter of privacy that is protected by law. Abortion is none of those things. All of that is simply propaganda for evil, pure deception, a twisting of truth to make it serve our sinful nature. Abortion stops life. Abortion halts life. Abortion takes life that does not belong to the taker. It is naïve to think otherwise. It is naïve to think that abortion is not a spiritual battle between light and darkness. I suspect that abortion has touched all of us in one way or another. I know that it has touched me.

Shame, guilt, sorrow, regret – abortion leaves deep scars. St. Paul had a scar. He stood watch over a murder. Stephen was stoned for being a Christian and Paul watched in approval (Acts 7:54-60). God called Paul deliberately (Acts 9). Out of darkness and into marvelous light, Paul was called by a gracious God (1 Peter 2:9-10). Ironically, Paul was struck blind as he was being converted. It is as though Jesus was saying: “I am the light of the world. He who follows me will not walk in darkness but will have the light of life” (John 8:12). Something like scales fell from Paul’s eyes and then he could see. He walked by faith, not by sight, so much so that he wrote this: “Christ came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am foremost” (1 Timothy 1:15). Christ came into the world to save you.

Into the world; Christ came *into* the world; true God, this Messianic King took up the form of a servant, becoming true man. Not to judge the world, but that the world might be saved through Him, light came into the world (John 3:17). Have you not had quite enough of darkness? Does your soul not long for Him who is Light of Light? What is His, He wills to give. Light in your very being; truth and clarity and resurrection is what Christ shares with you. “The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness, on them has light shined” (Isaiah 9:2). When all other sources of illumination fail, the Lord Christ shines with His grace, His sacrifice, His love. For all of us who have failed, for all of us who have taken comfort in darkness, Jesus brings the light of forgiveness to our heart, our mind, our soul. Forgiveness – that is the light in your life. That light has only one source for there is only One Savior. His blood was shed for you. His righteousness speaks for you. He has called you very deliberately: “Follow me.”

He called Simon and Andrew, James and John: “Follow me.” Those fishermen became fishers of men. Apostles, sent with the Light of Christ, those men brought the Gospel into the lives of those who needed escape from the darkness. It is oppressive, the darkness. Darkness is narcissism and nihilism and wokeism and critical race theory. Darkness breeds confusion and regression and perversion and secular authoritarianism. Are we naïve? Do we believe that the contemporary ideologies are going to benefit society while they dismantle marriage, dismantle Christian ethics, and any sense that gender carries with it meaning, purpose? Are we naïve? Do we believe that us being allied to the light doesn’t matter?

Follow me. Jesus has called you. That is the most significant reality in your life. You are an agent of light, a child of the Day (1 Thessalonians 5:5). God made light to shine out of darkness. Let there be! That was His creative will – light. And the Almighty saw that it was good. “God, who said, ‘Let light shine out of darkness,’ made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of God’s glory displayed in the face of Christ” (2 Corinthians 4:6). Have you seen light in a person? I have. I have seen humility, devotion, courage, honesty. I have seen charity, mercy, love, and protection. I have seen these things in believers. I know where they come from. Follow me. Jesus said that and He meant all that we are; our lives are anchored in His; His life saturates our own. Follow me. He is the light of the world and He is in us. What a marvel! Do you know what the Lord Christ said about you? He said this: “You are the light of the world” (Matthew 5:14). Do you believe it? Is it true? His light, His victory, His resurrection, His righteousness, His love, His fidelity, His mercy, His humility – it is all in you. That’s what He meant when He said that you are the light of the world. Follow me means something wonderful, something big.

About our Lord, the Gospel of John says this: “In him was life, and the life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it” (John 1:4-5). Do you know what that means? Light has won the victory. Christ’s sacrifice on the Holy Cross is Light’s eternal victory. His glory shines as He gives Himself for sinners – that we would not die, but live. He intervenes in love and takes our punishment. Those who love death spent their rage on the Lord of glory and He truly died. But that atoning death was the precursor to the greatest day this world has ever known. He is risen! Easter is the victory that shines in every era, shines in our time, shines in us. Bathed in light, you are a child of Easter, baptized into Jesus’ death and resurrection. What is our intention? Our intention is to let our light so shine so that others may see our good deeds and praise our Father in heaven (Matthew 5:16). Our intention is to follow Jesus.