

“Light Across the Ice”

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Continuing a series on the Gospel of John

John 8:12,21-30

March 12, 2017

When Jesus spoke again to the people, he said, *“I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.” . . .*

Once more Jesus said to them, *“I am going away, and you will look for me, and you will die in your sin. Where I go, you cannot come.”* This made the Jewish leaders ask, *“Will he kill himself? Is that why he says, ‘Where I go, you cannot come?’”*

But he continued, *“You are from below; I am from above. You from this world; I am not from this world. I told you that you would die in your sins; if you do not believe that I am he, you will indeed die in your sins.”*

“Who are you?” they asked. *“Just what I have been telling you from the beginning,”* Jesus replied. *“I have much to say in judgment of you. But he who sent me is trustworthy, and what I have heard from him I tell the world.”*

They did not understand that he was telling them about his Father. So Jesus said, *“When you have lifted up the Son of Man, then you will know that I am he and that I do nothing on my own but speak just what the Father has taught me. The one who sent me is with me; he has not left me alone, for I always do what pleases him.”*

Even as he spoke, many believed in him.

New International Version (adapted)

Why did they think Jesus was suicidal? He was speaking about death, but not his own death (not yet). Their deaths. Our deaths.

“I am going away, and you will look for me, and you will die in your sin. Where I am going, you cannot come.”

They missed the part about them: *You will die in your sin.* Let’s not miss that it is about us.

Jesus is the Light, God-Light shining into our spiritual darkness. But when you shine light into an old, rough cellar, you might not like what you see down there.

II

Jesus says, *“You will die in your sin.”* He repeats that a couple of times, but the other times he says, *“you will die in your sins.”* The first time, it is singular: “sin.” The other times, plural:

“sins.” This is not a slip of the tongue or an error writing it down. It points us to what sin really is.

Douglas John Hall, is a United Church theologian. He wrote this; he was talking about the Protestant Reformers of the 16th century.

They saw that sin meant disobedience, rebellion, refusal, turning away. In short, they saw [sin] as a relational term . . . the foundational relationship of human life — our relationship with God — is broken, and this brokenness shows up in all our other relations. . . . we should understand that [sins] are consequences of what is wrong, not its causes.¹

We do not act with love to our neighbour. We wrong in our thoughts, words and actions. These are “sins.” The deeper disease they are symptoms of, is “Sin.” The Sin is that we have broken our relationship with God.

We can only really see this, though, because Jesus, the God-Light, is shining on us. So it is good news!

III

Tim Keller tells about a time he was working for printing company. He’d sometimes work in the darkroom. He says, *“In the darkroom, there is a light, but not much of one. It’s sort of an orange light. If your hands got dirty, you’d look down and see your hands are dirty, and wipe them off with a rag, and they’d look fine. But then, when you got out into the main room, you could see all the crevices and cracks and fingernail dirt that was still there. So then you went and washed with soap. And they looked perfectly clean. But if you went to someone’s house, especially to someone’s dining room, under a chandelier, and if you put your hands out after a day of working at the printing shop on a nice, pristine, perfectly white linen table cloth, you looked down and realized your hands had a film of grime over them that you hadn’t seen before. The more light you get, the dirtier your hands look.”²*

Keller tells that to point to something peculiar about the Christian life. As we walk with Jesus the Light, we see better. We become godlier, more and more as God made us to be. Yet we find ourselves feeling less godly, because we see better. Things we didn’t see about ourselves before, we now start noticing. Things we had excused, passed off as normal, or not even seen, start to bother us. Walking with Jesus the Light does not make

¹ Quoted in Fleming Rutledge, The Crucifixion: Understanding the Death of Jesus (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015), 168.

² From Keller’s sermon, “Light from the Height” preached at Redeemer Presbyterian Church (New York City) on June 16, 1991. <http://www.gospelinlife.com/light-from-the-height-5162>

someone arrogant, or holier-than-thou. It makes us humbler.

It also makes us more joyful. The more you see your sin, the more you see how full of mercy God is toward you. God loves you. God cares for you. Yes . . . You! Living in Jesus the Light lifts our joy. So it is good news!

IV

There is a poem called "The Horseman and the Lake of Constance." It is a lake shared between Germany, Austria and Switzerland. The poem, written by Gustav Schwab in the 1800s,³ tells of a rider, racing to get to the lake before the day ends. He wants to reach the ferry that will take him across the lake, and he pushes his horse through the snowy landscape. As he nears the lake, the ground flattens, sparse of trees and rocks. He drives on, the nighttime hiding much that is around him. Yet a glimmer from a village by the lakeside pulls him ahead. Upon arriving, he knocks on a lighted window.

*"O, welcome, fair maid, at the window, say,
To the lake, to the lake, how far, I pray?"
The maiden gazed with wondering eye,
"Both ferry and lake behind thee lie.*

*And were it not bound by its icy crust,
I should say thou hadst quitted the boat but just."
The stranger shuddered in dread suspense,
"Yon plain behind, I have ridden thence!"*

*The maiden uplifted her arms and spake,
"Great God! thou hast ridden across the lake:
The hoofs of thy steed have knocked at the grave,
In the gulf of death, the fathomless wave;*

*Did the billows beneath thee not vent their wrath?
Broke not with a crash thy icy path?
Thou wert not the prey of the silent brood,
Of the ravenous pike, in the chilly flood?"*

³ Translated by Alfred Baskerville in Henry Wadsworth Longfellow (ed), Poems of Places: An Anthology in 31 Volumes (Boston: Boston: James R. Osgood & Co., 1876–79), volume 16. Available online at <http://www.bartleby.com/270/7/35.html>. Karl Barth referred to this poem in a sermon he gave to prisoners in Basel, Switzerland. See Ruthledge, 172.

*She calls forth the village the tale to hear,
The gathering groups of boys draw near;
The dames and the sires crowd round the spot:
"Rejoice, O fortunate man, at thy lot!"*

The villager enlightened him to the peril over which he had just ridden. He had crossed the ice-covered lake — Lake Constance rarely freezes over⁴ — he had crossed over death, unaware. In the poem, the man breaks down in despair.

V

Jesus the Light lets us see, see the danger, see the mortal death that Sin results in. Cutting ourselves off from God, everything about us withers and dies.

The Light lets us see this, but because it is by Jesus that we see, we see standing on the far side of the lake. From this side, we now see the perils we had been travelling over, the cracks we were breaking beneath us, the hypothermic hell we were creating. We shudder, and should.

But the Light has brought us over. So we are safe, saved, rescued. Realizing this, we can't help but do what the villager said to the rider: *"Rejoice, O fortunate one, at thy lot!"*

Against the white, washed table cloth, under the bright Light, we can see the grime of our hands. But listen, friends! We are here! We are at the party! This table is set for our banquet. Jesus has brought us in. Do not be shamed by the grime. Look around. All hands hold the same dirt, except his. And he has welcomed us with an unashaming embrace.

His, though, are pierced and wounded. Soiled for our sin, stained for our salvation.

Jesus said to his questioners, *"When you have lifted up the Son of Man — he is speaking of himself — then you will know that I am he."* His lifting-up is his cross. His death and resurrection condemn our Sin, and save our souls, and make us live. The Light carries us, light across the ice.

"Rejoice, O fortunate one, at thy lot!" Amen.

⁴ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lake_Constance#History