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Ephesians 5:8-14 “Bearing the Light of Peace”

Welcome to the first Sunday in Advent, which is actually the first day of the new church year. The church is a little out of sync with the rest of the world whose New Year doesn't start for another 29 days. But that's okay. The church ought to be out of sync. We're called to be “in the world, but not of the world,” so let's embrace that today. Turn to your neighbor and say, “Happy New Year!”

The Season of Advent is all about waiting in anticipation for our celebration of Jesus' birth. It will be another 22 days before the church is technically in “Christmas Season.” Again ... we're out of sync with the world. As far as the world is concerned, we're in Christmas Season right now and have been since October when Costco and Home Depot started selling Christmas decorations. The church likes to build anticipation. Remember when we were kids and we just couldn't wait for Christmas? For some reason, that changes when we become adults because it seems like we just get the Thanksgiving table cleared and boom ... it's Christmas already. That's what we're hoping to do during Advent. We're hoping we can restore some of that sense of wonder and anticipation. We're going to give you little snippets of Christmas each week to help build anticipation. You aren't going to see Jesus in the Nativity crèche until Christmas Eve. We're going to be stingy on the Christmas hymns for a couple of weeks. We're going to take advantage of the progressively shorter days to talk about what it means as the church to shine light in the darkness. In fact, “Bearing the Light” is our theme throughout Advent season. So with that, I'll invite Glenn to read our scripture for “Bearing the Light of Peace.”

A few weeks ago, I reminded you that this collection of letters here in the middle of the New Testament are some of the earliest writings in the New Testament. These are letters of encouragement, written mostly by the Apostle Paul, to churches that were beginning to feel discouraged because they thought Jesus would have returned by now. They were

also being thrown in jail by the Roman government because they claimed Jesus as their King and called him “Lord and Savior” which was a title reserved only for Caesar. On top of all that, many of these churches were starting to unravel because they were fighting with each other and arguing about who was “in” and who was “out.” What Glenn read comes from a letter that Paul wrote to the church in Ephesus from a Roman jail. Ephesus was the capital of the Asia Minor province in the Roman Empire. It was located on the West Coast of modern-day Turkey right across the Aegean Sea from Greece. Paul wasn’t the founder of this church, but the leaders recognized his authority as an Apostle, so any letter they’d receive from him would be treated as authoritative.

The passage we have in front of us today has to do with darkness and light. The churches in that region of Asia Minor were having a hard time letting go of their Pagan traditions. Which is sort of funny because look at us with all our trees and wreathes and yule logs that come right out of Northern European Pagan traditions. Paul told these folks that they were children of the light and that it was their job to shine this light in the darkness so that the light of Christ can reveal all of the appalling things that were happening in this community. Then he quotes what some scholars think is an early church song based on Isaiah 60:1. He says, “Sleeper, awake! Rise from the dead and Christ will shine on you.” “Sleeper awake!” This reminded me of a similar phrase that’s come up mostly in the African American community over the past few years: “Get woke.”

When I first heard that term, I went online to Urbandictionary.com, which is a great website for when you hear a slang term that you don’t understand, but you’re too embarrassed to ask your teenage kids or grandkids what it means. Urban Dictionary defines “woke” as, “When you get a sudden understanding of what’s really going on and find out you were wrong about much of what you understood to be truth.” I think this is what Paul was trying to tell the people in Ephesus when he said, “Sleeper awake.” Today he’s say, “Get woke.” There are things that have been going on right in front of you that are just plain wrong,

but you haven't been able to see it. But you are children of the light, and when you shine the light of Christ, you see just how many wrong things have been happening right in front of you under the cover of darkness.

So what does this mean today ... especially in the context of this Advent season where we're anticipating the birth of Jesus, "The Light of the World?" What does it mean to have light shed on a situation? What does it mean for your eyes to be opened? What does it mean to be awakened and to see the truth in front of you ... things that Paul calls "unfruitful works of darkness"... that you either hadn't noticed before or you have but just accepted it as a normal part of everyday life? When people are "woke," those shameful things that have been kept in the dark are suddenly exposed. They become visible. The beauty of the Bible is that even though it was written for people thousands of years ago who lived in a different culture, the truth of these scriptures carries down through all cultures and all generations. Last week, we talked about the abuse of power. And lately we've heard a lot about folks who have been abused by people in power. I promised last week that I wasn't going spend the rest of my sermon beating up on people who were abusing power because I wanted us to recognize our own power and how not to abuse it. Well this week I'm ready to shed some light on these things that have been covered by darkness for so long but have only recently come into the light. Now that the light has been shined on the sin of people who use their power and influence to abuse, we are "getting woke."

The veil has been pulled back and light has been shined on this epidemic of people, and let's be honest, the majority of them are men in power, who have been coercing both women *and* men to satisfy their selfish desires. You might ask, "How have they been able to get away with this?!" It's because they've been using their power to keep their deeds secret ... in the dark. These scandals aren't anything new ... they've been happening for as long as people have been in positions of power, which is ... for as long as humans have been on earth. It's only been recently that we've seen an increase in the frequency of these cases.

This “awakening” has shined a light in some pretty dark places. Just like that movie we saw in Faith and Films back in the summer ... *Spotlight* about how reporters from the Boston Globe shed light on the local Catholic diocese who were relocating priests accused of abusing children instead of removing their credentials like they were supposed to. So, some of the cases we’ve seen recently, unfortunately, aren’t surprising. There are those who have been “repeat offenders” for many years and have long histories of abusing power but were just two steps ahead of getting in trouble. Now that the light has been shined, they’re having to be accountable for their abuse. But there have also been some big surprises. People who’ve done a lot of good and who are generally considered “good apples.” Matt Lauer? Charlie Rose? Kevin Spacey? Roy Moore? Garrison Keillor? I think it’s too easy for us to say, “Well, they’re just bad apples in the bunch.” No, the *entire apple tree* is poisoned. The systems that are in place that allow people to get away with this ... the systems that make it easy for these people to victimize others ... that’s what needs to be exposed to the light. What bothers me almost as much as the acts of abuse themselves is the number of people who’ve witnessed the abuse who say, “Oh yeah ... we knew about this. But hey ... what can you do? It’s Hollywood. It’s business. It’s politics.” When we are “woke” to this ... especially those of us in the church ... we can begin to find ways to “bind up the brokenhearted” and “act justly” and all those other things that Jesus did and then commissioned his followers ... the church ... to continue doing.

Now, here’s the challenge of the day. If you’re defending any of these abusers on religious grounds, you need to be “woke.” I cringed when a prominent and powerful friend of one of the abusers came out and defended an abuser who was accused of making unwanted advances toward a teenager when the abuser was in his 30s. His friend said, “Take the Bible. Zachariah and Elizabeth for instance. Zachariah was extremely old to marry Elizabeth and they became the parents of John the Baptist. Also take Joseph and Mary. Mary was a teenager and Joseph was an adult carpenter. They became parents of Jesus. There’s just nothing immoral or illegal here.”

Again, if you are using religion to defend an abuser's actions, you need to stop, take a breath, shine the light of Christ on the situation and ask yourself, "Is this someone who I want to be endorsing right now?" Supporting? Okay. Abusers are human beings created in the image of God and they need people in their lives who will be there for them in prayer and who will help lead them to repentance, healing and wholeness where they can be held accountable for their actions so their victims can experience peace again. That's Biblical. But we can't be endorsing and defending them because it perpetuates the problem. It keeps things veiled in darkness.

The Advent Message is, "The light of the world is coming!" Maybe not in the way we expect. The light of the world doesn't come in a sudden, blinding, blaze of glory. The light comes in the form of an infant born in a manger. The light is actually quite small. But as that light is passed on from person to person, it gets bigger and brighter. It's a lot like our Christmas Eve candlelight service when we take one little flame from the Christ candle and pass it on from person to person until the sanctuary is filled with light. The more the light is passed on, the brighter it gets, and it starts chipping away at the darkness. And when those dark places are revealed, we can awaken to the truth, and as Jesus said in John's gospel, "We will know the truth and that truth will set us free."