

Epiphany 5: “The light shines in the darkness.” The bodily word of his Supper

(The basic line for an Epiphany sermon on the Lord’s Supper.)

In this season of Epiphany we celebrate the coming of the light: John 1:5: “The light shines in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it.”

It is not news to say that secularism is on the rise and Christianity on the decline in the West, to say nothing of the deadly persecution of Christians happening in parts of the world. Is this a new Dark Ages? Today whether you are driving through city or countryside, it is not uncommon to see churches that have been closed and converted into “event centers” or “real estate offices” or “community centers,” and the like.

Social scientists report that there is a fast-growing category of young adults today who identify as “spiritual but not religious.” They are called the “nones.” On forms that ask about one’s religious affiliation, they respond “none.” Generally speaking young adults use this self-definition to mean that they want no part of the “institutional church” but seek to be spiritual, to have a connection with a transcendent beyond.

To want to be spiritual is a noble sentiment, but no matter what form spirituality takes – whether it’s secular-based, other religion-based, even Christian-based spirituality – it always boils down to this. Spirituality is code for: You have to do something to make it happen. It’s up to you to make it work.

The desire to be spiritual is born of wishful thinking that we have a light within us, a spark of divinity within. And we can and should fan that flame, do whatever spiritual exercises it takes to achieve a higher awareness. Spirituality is based on the belief that we have the strength and wisdom within us to find our way in the darkness. All we need to do is activate the spark within by doing spiritual exercises, inwardly and outwardly, to rise to some higher awareness, some higher plane.

In Walker Percy’s novel *The Second Coming*, there’s a hilarious description of a mixed gathering of people, among them born-again Christians, old-line Episcopalians, Jesus freaks, a fortune-teller, and a Jehovah’s Witness. As he observes the scene, the narrator asks,

Is this an age of belief, a great renaissance of faith after a period of materialism, atheism, agnosticism, liberalism, scientism? Or is it an age of madness in which everyone believes everything?

An age of darkness and fog, of people groping in the darkness, trying to fan the flame within them, looking for the light. An age of believing everything. The encroaching darkness makes one wonder: Where did the Lord go? Has he rejected his people? Has he given up on us? In the madness has he withdrawn?

In Romans 11:1 Paul quotes Elijah, who was fed up with Israel’s madness and cried out in the darkness: “Lord, they have killed your prophets and torn down your altars; I am the only one left, and they are trying to kill me” (Rom. 11:3).

As Paul writes: “But what is God’s reply to [Elijah]? He says: ‘I have reserved for myself seven thousand who have not bowed the knee to Baal.’ So, too, at the present time there is a remnant chosen by grace.

And if it is by grace, it is no longer on the basis of works; otherwise grace would no longer be grace” (Rom. 11:4–6).

The message is this: Salvation is not in your hands. It’s not up to you. The cosmic battle between the encroaching darkness and the light has been won, though the darkness is still with us. “In him was life and the life was the light of men” (John 1:5) “The true light that enlightens every man was coming into the world” (John 1:9).

“Have no fear little flock, for it is your Father’s good pleasure to give you the kingdom” (Luke 12:32). You don’t have to do spiritual exercises to get in shape for it. There is no right disposition or attitude you have to have to receive it. There are no preconditions you have to meet. And no post-conditions you have to maintain afterwards to provide evidence that you are one of the chosen.

Which brings us to the Lord’s Supper and how the Lord provides for us, giving light in the darkness.

First, faith is not about being spiritual. Faith is not about thinking the right thoughts, or feeling the right feelings. Faith is not a work. Faith is not anything we think, feel, or do. Faith is even against spirituality, because spirituality, in the end, is always about us and what we can and should do to make salvation work. And that is not how salvation works.

Rather, faith comes by hearing (Rom 10:17). Hearing what God in Christ has done by himself, without our help, to solve the problem of evil, to defeat the darkness, to defeat sin, death, and the devil.

The benefits of the cross and resurrection, the fruits of that work of salvation, are the forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation. As Luther writes in the Small Catechism:

The benefits of this sacrament are pointed out by the words,

Given and shed for you for the forgiveness of sins.

These words assure us that in the sacrament

We receive forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation.

For where there is forgiveness of sins,

There is also life and salvation.

Salvation, not in part, but in whole. It is **all** God’s doing. For our **whole** selves.

Thus, there is no need to do spiritual exercises; to fan an imaginary spark within. Nothing can be done from our side to increase faith or improve upon it. The benefits of what Christ did – outside of us, in spite of us – are given by faith. Faith comes by hearing the word and receiving the sacraments.

Faith is given to the tiny baby being baptized. The child is not even aware of what is happening. And it’s not that the child’s family and church believe for the child until the child is old enough to make that decision on his own. To the contrary, baptism saves. Faith is given. The Holy Spirit is given. It is all God’s doing. The baptism of a baby reminds us that salvation is all God’s doing.

The same is true for the Lord’s Supper. The Lord comes to us in his Supper to give us a foretaste of the feast to come. To remind us of the promise made in baptism. Have no fear, baptized one, it is your Father’s good pleasure to give you the kingdom.

Are you worthy of this? Do you come to the altar worthy to receive? No. We come as sinners. With Isaiah we confess: "All our righteous deeds are filthy rags" (Isa 64:6). The way of salvation does not depend on anything we are, think, say, or do (Smalcald Articles III/III/36).

Just as we are not asked to make a decision; so receiving the sacrament is not just for those in their "right minds." Our salvation does not depend on whether we have Alzheimer's, schizophrenia, dementia, personality disorders, or whether we are full of doubts and anger. Our salvation doesn't depend on us in any way, shape, or form, lost and helpless as we all are.

Faith is not spirituality, and salvation is not merely about our inner selves. Faith comes to us from outside of us and comes to our whole selves. In the Lord's Supper we eat bread and drink wine; salvation comes to our bodies – our whole selves, body, heart, and mind. Not part of us is justified by his grace; our whole self is justified by his grace. Our whole selves are redeemed by him. "For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his" (Rom 6:5).

"God works in mysterious ways his wonders to perform." The Lord is working in ways we do not see and do not understand. His power, his wisdom, and his holiness are beyond us, and yet he is at work in us as well. As Paul writes: "(T)he word of God, which is indeed at work in you who believe" (1 Thess. 2:13).

"Believe" here is not a work that we do. It is not about our spiritual potential. Or spiritual efforts. Faith is God's doing, given in baptism, outside of us, in spite of us. As Luther says: "The law says, do this, and it is never done. Grace says, 'You are baptized' [believe this] and everything is already done."

It's dark out there in the world. It's dark within us, too. But "the light shines in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it" (John 1:5). The light has a name: Jesus Christ our Lord and Savior.

Long ago he was crucified, died, and buried. But God raised him from the dead. Through the power of his Holy Spirit, he who is veiled in inaccessible light – is living today. We cannot see him like we see each other, but he is here with us by the power of his Word, working in mysterious ways his wonders to perform.

He comes in his Supper to give you a foretaste of the feast to come. He comes in, with, and under the bread and wine to redeem you, not just your inner self, but all of you, your whole self, your body, too.

The message is this: Salvation is not in your hands. "Have no fear little flock, it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom" (Luke 12:32). His holiness is beyond our understanding. No matter. Our living Lord is here. He has claimed us in baptism. His Supper today is a foretaste of the feast to come.