

Fourth Sunday of Lent (Laetare Sunday) – Cycle B
Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception – March 11, 2018
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We've been in Daylight Savings Time for about seven/nine hours at this point. You would think that our bodies could easily adjust – but, in my case at least, you would be wrong. I could not seem to get to sleep any earlier last night and it was even harder for me to awaken this morning. Yes, the days are getting longer and we can enjoy the extra hour of daylight that the time change brings us – but today, at least, I am one of those that Jesus was talking about in the gospel. Today as I struggled to get up, I realized that I prefer the darkness to the light – because the light means that I'm losing an hour or two of sleep.

That wasn't exactly Jesus' point in the gospel, of course. He was talking about humanity being trapped in the darkness of sin and resisting the light of salvation. But in many respects it is just as difficult for us to leave sin behind as it is to adjust to losing an hour's sleep. You see, sin has often become so much a part of our daily rhythm, become so much a part of who we are and how we live that eliminating it would be painful. Eliminating sin would indeed be like walking out into the sunshine after a few hours in the movie theatre. It is painful. All we want to do is go back inside, return to our comfortable life, shield our eyes from the glare of the sunlight. And that's the problem, isn't it? Once we're in the light, we can't bring the darkness back – at least not completely. Oh, we can look for some shade, we can look for another building to enter or a tree to stand under – but we can't cause the sun to set. We may scamper into the shade, but our eyes know that it is only a temporary solution. Once the light has come, the darkness is scattered. If given half a chance, light always crowds out the darkness.

Of course, it's that half a chance that is the problem. Darkness and sin work hard to maintain their grip on us – and frankly we've grown very comfortable in their grasp. The people of ancient Israel had also grown comfortable with sin. Oh, they maintained their minimal connection to the Lord God. They wanted to remain God's chosen people. They wanted their covenant relationship to continue – as long as God did all the work and they reaped all the benefits. But eventually, as we learned in the first reading, sin took its toll on them. There were so many things that occupied their hearts and minds, so many distractions that pushed their covenant with the Lord God into the background. Israel had lost her way – and it took losing everything – it took being exiled to Babylon for seventy years to make them see that. By the time Cyrus of Persia freed them, enabled them to return to the Promised Land, they had resolved to do better, resolved to put God first in their lives. They had a new understanding of what it meant to be faithful to the Lord.

They had a new understanding of their covenant. Living in exile, they came to realize that their relationship with God was not based upon the land under their feet, but on the law of God which he implanted in their hearts. Oh, they might have grasped that while still in the land of milk and honey – but the allure of the darkness of sin had clouded their judgment. Ironically, they only understood their covenant relationship when it was in ruins and they were held captive in Babylon.

This season of Lent is meant to be our Babylonian captivity. This season of Lent is meant to be our time to set aside the distractions of our ordinary life and to concentrate upon our relationship with God. It is our time to re-discover our identity, our time to focus on what is truly important. Like Nicodemus, we are invited into that privileged conversation with the Lord, into a personal relationship at the feet of Jesus Christ. Of course, if your Lent has been at all like mine, this has been a chance to put away some of the ordinary distractions of life – only to have some pretty extra-ordinary ones crop up. Every time you think things will go smoothly, that you will have abundant prayer time, that your schedule will permit you to do a little extra spiritual reading – well, reality sets in. You may try to clear away some space, but nature abhors a vacuum. Something else will come crowding in. If we keep our eyes on this world, then there will always be something else to capture our attention.

That's why we have to look up; we have to raise our eyes from everything that occupies us every other day. That's why, as Jesus told Nicodemus, the Son of Man had to be lifted up. No one would believe that the eternal Son of God took on human flesh just to be born, spend some time as a carpenter in Galilee, preach for a few years and then die a natural death. If Jesus was truly to inspire belief, he had to take on the full range of human experience – including suffering and death – and he had to conquer them. Jesus had to do more than dwell in the ordinary shadows and darkness of first century Palestine. He had to be that light to the nations. In being lifted up on the cross, he showed the depth of God's love for us. In his life, death, and resurrection, he scattered the darkness of sin and brought healing and salvation to the world. Yes, his light is powerful, but it is also gentle. Just as the sun does not shine in rooms without windows or through doors that are closed, so the light of Christ does not invade a human heart that is closed, a human heart that prefers darkness to light. That is our further challenge this Lent – to open our hearts to the healing light of Christ, and to give our hearts a chance to adjust to his light. I am confident that I will be accustomed to Daylight Savings Time about the time that we set our clocks back in the fall. I hope that my heart will continue to adjust to the light of Christ, and that my soul will be healed in the process.