



LIVING WORD EPISCOPAL CHURCH

Evangelical • Reformed • Catholic

Now You are Light

Ephesians 5:1-14 &

St. Luke 11:14-28

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The season of Lent evolved in the ancient Church as a time for new Christians to be taught what it means to be a Christian and to prepare them for baptism at Easter. It was also as a time for Christians who had fallen into grievous sin to show their repentance and to be received back into the Church's fellowship at Easter. The first group—the new Christians—needed to be taught what it meant to live in, to have their life in Jesus. The second group, those repentant sinners, needed a reminder of the same thing. And both needed to understand that life in Christ involves a change of state, a change of mind, a change of heart, and a dramatic change of life—it demands repentance. Christians march to the beat of a different drum. We live according to the values of God's kingdom and of the age to come, not the values of this present age, the values of Caesar, the values of self.

In the ancient church it was on this third Sunday in Lent that these candidates for baptism were exorcised—not necessarily meaning that they were all in need of deliverance from demon possession, but that they were given a solemn warning that in their upcoming baptism they were required to renounce their old ways of doing things, their old loyalties, their old sources of security, their old sins, their old selfishness—just as we still in our baptismal vows renounce the temptations of the world, the flesh, and the devil and instead put on Christ.

In the Gospel Jesus gives us a dramatic picture of a man possessed by a demon. The demon is cast out—sent packing. Jesus describes the demon in hopeless desperation looking for a new home—as if he were wandering the wilderness. But he finds nothing. Eventually he gives up. He goes back to man who had been exorcised and sees that someone has “cleaned house” while he's been gone. The man looks more attractive than ever, so the demon goes out, finds seven of his friends who are also looking for a home, and brings them back to afflict this poor man. As Jesus says, “The last state of that man is worse than the first.”

Jesus' point in telling this story was that something drastic had to change in Israel. God's people had gone off the tracks. As we read in last week's Gospel, Jesus was sent to the lost sheep of Israel—he came to get God's people back on track with the ministry and the mission the Lord had given them through Abraham. Do you remember what that was? It was to be a light to the nations. And for the most part Israel had failed. Different people and different movements had tried to get things back on track—Jesus wasn't the first. The problem was that each time it looked like Israel was set straight, she ended up running off the tracks again. Each time it got worse, just as the man in the story was worse after the house-cleaning than before. Again, something needed to change and that's what Jesus came to do. In Jesus the God of Israel returned to his people, not just to rebuke them for their sins, not even just to forgive them for those sins, but to rebuke, to forgive, and—*most importantly*—to make them his dwelling place, to incorporate them into his life and to transform them from the inside out.

In Jesus we see the faithfulness of God, because in Jesus we see his promises to Israel—and through Israel to the nations—fulfilled. Jesus provides forgiveness for all the past failures and offers a way of life that sets God's people back on course for

the kingdom and it all centres on and in Jesus himself. St. Paul describes this new life and this new way of living—this new way of being Israel—in our Epistle today from Ephesians. Our passage is lifted from the middle of a longer section that begins with Paul describing what some call his “put off/put on” principle. It's a principle we see in the story of the demon-possessed man in the Gospel. When it comes to God, when it comes to his kingdom, when it comes to our loyalties there is no neutral ground. Again, Jesus didn't come to forgive our sins so that we can start over with God and hopefully get it right this time. That won't work. We'd just make a mess of things all over again. No. Jesus came to forgive *and* to fix what is broken in us. In forgiving us he makes us right with God *so that* by the gift of the Holy Spirit he may then incorporate us into the life of God. The Spirit regenerates our hearts, turning them from self and sin back to God and to holiness. The Spirit renews our minds, setting them too on the things of God. And the Spirit, in uniting us to the life of God, gives back to us the gift of life. Adam was given that gift, but in sinning he rejected it, he was cut off from the life of God and cast out of his presence and subjected again to death. But in the Spirit we are connected with that life again, giving us a foretaste of the resurrection that awaits all those who are in Jesus. And so Paul insists: We've got to put off the old and put on the new. It's either the old, sinful self-centred self or the new Jesus-centred self. There's nothing between. There's no neutral state. If you want to participate in life in Christ, you've got to put off the old life centred on self and put on this new life that Jesus has made possible.

The Scriptures have all sorts of different ways of describing and illustrating this life. Jesus talks about himself as a vine and about us as the branches that were once dead wood, but are now grafted in. In other places he talks about roots and trees and about branches that fail to bear fruit

being pruned off and other branches being grafted in so that they can bear fruit. St. Paul likes to use the image of the body: Jesus is the head and we, his people, his Church, are all the various and essential constituent parts. But here in this passage about putting off and putting on Paul uses the powerful image of adoption. Look at Ephesians 5:1-2:

Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children. And walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.

As I said, our Epistle begins into the middle of a longer discussion. The “therefore” follows Paul’s admonitions in the second half of Chapter 4. In 4:17 he writes: “Now this I affirm and insist on in the Lord: you must no longer live as the Gentiles live.” He then goes on to talk about all sorts of sin and sinful thinking: licentiousness, greed, stealing, laziness, dirty talk, bitterness, fighting, and anger. This is how the Gentiles live, but Jesus has given us new life. He’s incorporated us into Israel—into God’s people. (Remember that he’s writing Ephesians to Gentile Greeks.) And now Paul pauses for a minute to remind us why. Why do we need to put off those old ways and put on new ways of life? He refers to it as imitating God—allowing our character to be shaped by his character and he tells us that we need to do this because we’ve been made his children. It’s the imagery of adoption.

Brothers and Sisters, consider this: Jesus is God’s Son. If we are in him—taking hold of him in faith not just for forgiveness, but for life itself—then that makes us by adoption sons and daughters of God as well. In Jesus we are adopted into God’s family. In Jesus we are made children of God. And it has been true of God’s family—his children—from the beginning that they are called to live like the family, to imitate God their

Father. Going all the way back to Israel’s time in the wilderness as she was gathered around Mt. Sinai where God gave his law to Moses. It was there at Sinai, after the Lord had rescued Israel from Egypt, that he made her his people. In Leviticus 19:2 he declared through Moses: “You shall be holy, for I the LORD your God am holy.” God’s people are to be holy *because* God himself is holy. The *torah*—the law—was given to Israel to show her what that holiness looked like.

Now in Jesus the law is fulfilled. Paul now says to be imitators of God because we are his children and we do that best by looking to the example of Jesus. What does holiness look like? In Jesus we see that it looks like love—specifically, love in action. And love in action manifests itself supremely in sacrifice. The best example of holiness that Paul can think of is the sacrifice of Jesus. In Jesus the Word of God became incarnate, humbling himself and taking on our human form, being born of a virgin, being scorned, rejected, humiliated, and finally crucified—all for the sake of men and women who were his rebellious enemies. Jesus’ example of loving sacrifice is the embodiment of holiness. In the temple the smoke that rose from the sacrifices as they were burnt on the altar was symbolic of their being pleasing to God and as Paul describes Jesus’ loving sacrifice in those same terms: a fragrant offering, a fragrant sacrifice. Again, in Jesus we see what true love looks like and in that true love we see true holiness.

Is sacrificial love hard? Of course. It’s especially hard when we realise that this isn’t just about sacrificially loving the people we already naturally love, but that we’re *also* called to sacrificially love our enemies and the people who have hurt us. We’re called to sacrifice our old way of sinful and self-centred life for the sake of God, which means giving up so

many things we love and so many things in which we used to find security. It’s hard. I don’t know anyone who has yet to perfect it. And yet it shouldn’t be a chore. It shouldn’t be a dreary duty. And that’s because *grace is at the heart of it*. Brothers and Sisters, we are called to love sacrificially because in Jesus God has loved us sacrificially—giving his life for our sake—for the sake of his own enemies. As his children, sacrificial love *should* be our nature. But this is just it. This is why it’s so important that we consciously put off the old self and put on the new. We are not capable of sacrificial love on our own. It’s part of the character that comes with life in Jesus. It’s part of the fruit of the Holy Spirit. And so we have to cooperate with the Spirit, we have to cultivate the life of Jesus the Spirit makes possible. The more we live in, the more we rely on, the more we cultivate the grace of God in our lives—that unmerited favour that comes to us through the cross of Christ—the more gracious our character will become and the more grace will infuse our nature and our character. This is why Paul stresses our duty to love in terms of the love Jesus has shown us—reminding us of the loving grace we have been shown ourselves. This is the cross-centred, this is the Jesus-centred life with God’s grace always at the centre of everything and always shaping our thought and our actions.

Now, whenever we talk about “thou shalt” and “thou shalt not” we need to remember grace, we need to remember the cross, we need to remember Jesus—we need to remember that we don’t earn or merit forgiveness or life by doing or by not doing. Forgiveness and life are gifts of grace. Paul’s been talking about “thou shalt” and “thou shalt not” and he’s interjected this point about love and grace here, reminding us that we aren’t God’s people because we act a certain way. Absolutely not. We act a certain because we are God’s people.

We aren't Christians because we're holy. We're holy because we're Christians. And with that he carries on in verse 3:

But sexual immorality and all impurity or covetousness must not even be named among you, as is proper among saints. Let there be no filthiness nor foolish talk nor crude joking, which are out of place, but instead let there be thanksgiving. For you may be sure of this, that everyone who is sexually immoral or impure, or who is covetous (that is, an idolater), has no inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and God. Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of these things the wrath of God comes upon the sons of disobedience. (Ephesians 5:3-6)

The first two things Paul lists as being contrary to this life of loving sacrifice are sexual immorality and covetousness or greed. Why these two? Because of all the sins Paul could have listed, these two are the most inherently idolatrous; these two are the most at odds with the character of God and the character of the Christian. Fertility cults were a major part of pagan worship and often involved "sacred" prostitution. Temples were often little more than brothels. In the Old Testament this word for sexual immorality, *porneia*, was often used to describe Israel in her unfaithfulness, prostituting herself to foreign, pagan idols. In the New Testament the Church is described as the bride of Christ. To fall back into our old, sinful ways is to be unfaithful to our Lord. And throughout Scripture, marital fidelity is the picture often used of God's love for his people and the love God's people should have for him. Greed boils down to idolatry as well and it characterizes the opposite of the sacrificial love we see in Jesus. Love gives everything it has, but greed is never happy and insists on taking and accumulating more. Greed and sexual

immorality are so utterly contrary to the character of God and his children that we should find it absolutely scandalous for either of these sins might be connected with the Church, with the people of God.

In fact, Paul warns: sexual immorality and greed are the characteristics of idolaters and since idolaters by definition reject God, such people have no inheritance in God's kingdom. In fact, they stand in his wrath. They are *not* and have no right to call themselves sons and daughters of God. And Paul warns: It's not just that sexual immorality and greed should not be part of our character, but that we should have nothing to do with those who are characterized by sexual immorality and greed.

This is first a call for the Church to exercise discipline when it comes to her own members. The Church cannot turn a blind eye to churchgoers who are unrepentantly greedy or unrepentantly immoral sexually. For their own sake, those whose character is contrary to their profession of faith must be held accountable even to the point of being put out of the Church if they persist in sin and refuse to repent. Turning a blind eye to their sin means giving them false assurance of salvation. This is what church discipline is about. It's not punitive; it's meant to be redeeming and reconciling.

Second, while being light in the darkness means engaging with those lost in the dark, as Christians we must be careful not to fall back into darkness ourselves. It means trusting in Jesus and committing ourselves to a life and an agenda of holiness in imitation of our Father, rather than trusting in or collaborating with the darkness that so permeates the business and political spheres around us. Remember, the cross and the empty tomb declare that the days of this present evil age are numbered. Jesus is Lord and his kingdom is

breaking into the world. In light of that knowledge it is foolish for Christians to invest themselves and to trust in a system that is passing away. To do so is a betrayal of our citizenship in God's kingdom. It's a betrayal of the family into which we've been adopted. We need to remember Paul's warning to have nothing to do with darkness.

This is the sort of life we're called to put off as we find new life, new identity, new character in Jesus. Paul goes on in verse 7:

Therefore do not become partners with them; for at one time you were darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Walk as children of light (for the fruit of light is found in all that is good and right and true), and try to discern what is pleasing to the Lord. Take no part in the unfruitful works of darkness, but instead expose them. For it is shameful even to speak of the things that they do in secret. But when anything is exposed by the light, it becomes visible, for anything that becomes visible is light. (Ephesians 5:7-14a)

Notice, it's not just that at one time we were in the dark and have now been brought into the light. That's true, but Paul says something even more striking: We were once darkness ourselves, but now through the Lord Jesus we are ourselves light. Again, our character has been utterly and completely transformed. We were dead; in Jesus we are alive. We were darkness; in Jesus we are light. We were once greedy, selfish sinners; in Jesus our lives are characterized—or should be characterised—by the same sacrificial love he has shown to us. And so instead of taking part in works of darkness, instead of backing the darkness, we are called to bear the fruit of light. Paul says that these are the things that are good and right and true. Through the prophet Micah the Lord called Israel as his people to reflect his own character. They were to act justly, to love mercy, and to

walk humbly with God. That's a good place to start. We're to seek out, Paul says—to discern—what is pleasing to the Lord and for that we have the Scriptures. In the Bible we have the witness to God's own character which he calls us to imitate. We have the witness of the prophets as they called Israel to holiness, to justice, and to mercy. And in the New Testament we have the example of Jesus which Paul draws on here. It's impossible to be darkness and light at the same time, so put off the works of darkness and put on Christ—put on the light.

And our light should have an impact on the darkness. The ugly reality of evil hides under cover of the darkness, but as light drives the darkness away it exposes evil and all its ugliness. In the presence of light evil has no place to hide and no way to deny its ugliness. In verse 14 Paul says something difficult—Bible scholars disagree on the precise point he's making when he says that "anything that becomes visible is light", but the gist seems to be that as much as evil hates to be exposed, that exposure is what brings redemption. J.B. Phillips puts it this way in his paraphrase:

For light is capable of "showing up" everything for what it really is. It is even possible (after all, it happened with you!) for light to turn the thing it shines upon into light also.

At one point each of us was laid bare to the soul by the light and that being laid bare moved us to repentance and to faith. Now it's our duty to be the light that lays darkness bare and calls others to repentance and faith. And so Paul finishes with what was probably a hymn sung at Easter or at baptisms:

**Therefore it says,
"Awake, O sleeper,
and arise from the dead,
and Christ will shine on you."
(Ephesians 5:14b)**

Each of us was once asleep—unaware—of our death and subjection to sin, but the light of Christ was shone us. It cut through the darkness and laid bare our sin, but in it too we heard the proclamation of the Good News: that Jesus is Lord. He died to conquer sin and he rose to conquer death. That light moved each of us to turn away from our sin and to take hold of Jesus in faith for the forgiveness and life he gives. And with that Paul brings us full-circle. In Jesus we have new life. In Jesus we've been adopted as sons and daughters of God. In Jesus we've been given new character. In Jesus we who were once darkness have been made light. Dear friends, if you are still asleep, open your eyes to the light. As painful as it is, let the light expose your sin so that you can repent and turn instead to Jesus. Take hold of the light in faith and become light yourself.

If you have taken hold of Jesus in faith, remember that what you are. In your baptism Jesus has plunged you into the Holy Spirit. You are light, not darkness. Your character has been transformed. Have nothing to do with the darkness. Have nothing to do with the sin that hides under its cover. Put off the old man or old woman and put on Jesus Christ out of gratitude for the sacrificial love that God has shown you in Jesus and knowing that your character of light is meant to glorify God and it's meant to witness Jesus to others who are still caught in the dark.

Let us pray: As we pray each Advent season, Father, give us grace to cast away the works of darkness and to put on the armour of light. Give us grace to put off the old, to put off sin, and to put off self, that we might put on the life Jesus has given us, a life of love, a life of sacrifice, a life of holiness that everyone around us may see that we are your people and that your light might shine through us to drive away the darkness. We ask this through

Jesus Christ our Saviour and Lord.
Amen.