

## “Coal Miner Christians”

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Based upon Eccl. 3:1-8; Ephesians 5:6-20

“Where shall I look for enlightenment?” a disciple asks a wise man in a story told by author and spiritual leader, Joan Chittister.

“Look here,” answers the wise one.

“When will it happen?” the disciple asked.

“It is happening right now,” the wise one said.

“Then why don’t I experience it?”

“Because you don’t look.”

“What should I look for?”

“Nothing. Just look.”

“Look at what?”

“At anything your eye lights on.”

“But must I look in a special way?”

“No, the ordinary way will do.”

“But don’t I always look in the ordinary way?”

“No, you don’t.”

“But why ever not?”

“Because to look, you must be here. And you are mostly somewhere else.”<sup>1</sup>

Do you find that you spend a lot of your time mentally or emotionally “somewhere else?” If you do, you’re not alone. Many people, if not most people, spend much of their lives with their bodies in one place and their minds in another. Introverts are notorious for doing this because we need time to think before we speak. So we tend to rehearse or review conversations in our heads continuously, even while our bodies are doing other things. But even extroverted planners, visionaries, and busy people live with their minds somewhere else too. They typically live in the future, anticipating all the tasks that still have to be accomplished in the near future, or dreaming or worrying about what might happen in the distant future. The elders on Session have been doing a lot of this lately, as we strive to discern where we would like the church to be in five years so we can make plans to help us get there. Do you ever think about where you will be, or want to be in five years in this way? Do you think about what our nation will be like in the future?

As a lawyer, I was trained to think about the future constantly. Good lawyers have to do this because it’s a lawyer’s job is to try to prevent harm to a client by anticipating all the worst in people and circumstances. Then he or she can plan as needed to ensure that the client will be protected in the event of those circumstances. Know a couple getting married? A good family lawyer would look ahead into their future, anticipate a possible divorce, and suggest a prenuptial agreement. Entering into a business contract? A good contract lawyer will write the liability, mediation, and indemnification clauses that will protect his or her client if the deal goes south.

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<sup>1</sup> As quoted by Adams, Joanna, “*Should There Be a Clock in the Sanctuary?*”, DAY 1, Jan. 3, 2010, citing Joan Chittister, *There is a Season*, Orbis Books, 1999.

Some people say that this makes lawyers depressing or cynical people. But it's not that they want bad things to happen, or even think that they will; they just want to be ready for them if they do.

These days you don't have to be an introvert, lawyer, or session member to be preoccupied with about the future, however. In the past couple of years so many unprecedented events and changes have happened in our nation—in the ways our government, the natural world, and society work, that even the most grounded minds have started to drift ahead to the future, contemplating worst-case scenarios. If we can't prevent bad things from happening, we at least want to be ready to cope when they do. But the more you think about these things, the more difficult it is to keep your eyes, mind, and heart present in the now. The more your mind anticipates potential dark ages to come, the more afraid you can feel, and the more afraid you feel, the more you will feel as though those dark days are now. It's a vicious cycle, and one which, when you're caught up in it, can make it almost impossible to find enlightenment, and even harder to find comfort and hope.

To break out of this cycle, we have to learn how to see and live differently. According to the late Bo Lozoff, a philosopher and spiritual leader who inspired Fred Rogers in his ministry, we have to train ourselves to see, not through the lens of fear, but faith. In his book Deep and Simple, Lozoff explains the difference this way. He wrote, "Fear says, 'You'd better watch out! It's dark up ahead!' But in daily practice of faith, you can remind yourself, 'Of course it's dark up ahead! Up ahead is not my business; this moment is, and it's light enough for me to see right now.' We're like a coal miner carrying his light on his cap. Wherever he arrives, it is light enough for him to see. He doesn't look ahead and say, 'But it's dark up there!' He knows that by the time he gets there, it will be light. This light by which we see comes from inside of us. So it makes more sense to work on brightening our light and keeping the batteries strong, than to worry about what's in the dark up ahead. The light only exists 'here,' wherever we are— never 'there.' And it only exists 'now,' never 'then.' Faith accepts this, fear refuses to."<sup>2</sup>

I love that coal miner image because it conveys in very simple, visual terms the same lesson that the author of *Ephesians* conveys in slightly more confusing theological terms. "Live as children of light," he wrote, "making the most of the time because the days are evil. For once you were darkness, but now in the Lord you are light. Be careful how you live then, not as unwise people but as wise." I'm mixing verses together from two paragraphs a bit to clarify the point, but notice the verbs that the author uses. "You *were* darkness but now in the Lord you *are* light." He doesn't say that the people are living *in* darkness or light. He says that they *are* these things, just like the coal miners *are* light in the darkness. Paul wanted his readers to know that because of Christ, they had the ability to choose to dwell in light or not, and that when they did, they would become what they chose. They would either live as those who shine as lights in the darkness, as those who demonstrate from their actions that they know what is good and right and true, or they would live as those who are sources of darkness, who deceive others using empty words, and do shameful, unfruitful, fearful, and evil things.

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<sup>2</sup> Lozoff, Bo, Deep & Simple: A Spiritual Path for Modern Times, (Durham: The Human Kindness Foundation, 1999), 13.

You probably don't have to work too hard to think of examples of people who are light and darkness in this way. But because some of you here are "light" people who have stepped out of the particular darkness of excessive drinking, which the author of *Ephesians* specifically condemns in today's text, I want to unpack that example a bit. He is not saying those who drink are evil; Christians had wine with Communion regularly back then. The reason the author felt he needed to single out "getting drunk" as a "dark" behavior is that in ancient Ephesus, one of the most popular pagan gods that people worshiped was Dionysus, who was the god of wine. Disciples of Dionysus believed that drinking was a way, not just to numb themselves against the fear and pain the world's darkness caused, and not just to have a good time, but also to gain divine enlightenment. They would get drunk seeking their god, but instead of finding divine wisdom, would find themselves descending further into the sins and darkness that go with excessive drinking, behaviors which destroy relationships, integrity, physical health, and emotional goodness. So the author to *Ephesians* wanted to make it clear that when he said "be children of light" he wasn't saying "go get drunk." He did not mean practice idolatrous or destructive behaviors. He meant that the new Christians should connect with the divine by doing what was pleasing to God in Christ. They should replace seeking alcoholic spirits with seeking the Holy Spirit, and bar songs and bacchanals with hymns of praise and worship. They should find their enlightenment walking in the ways of Christ.

When you walk with the light of Christ, that light illuminates all the darkness around you for you and for others, just as a coal miner's helmet illuminates the darkness of the tunnels ahead of him. But in order to gain wisdom, enlightenment, comfort, and hope from that light, you need to know how to make the most of it. The Rev. Dr. Howard Chapman learned this lesson in a very concrete way as a child long before he began preaching about the light of Christ as a pastor.<sup>3</sup>

When he was a young boy, his lived in Sierra Leone, West Africa, with his parents who were missionaries. Flashlights were very important to them because it was not safe to walk at night in the dark. There were no streetlights, so you could easily trip and fall. But even more worrisome, there were also deadly venomous snakes around, like cobras and black mambas, which came out at night. If you stepped on one and it bit you, you would be dead in a matter of minutes.

One night, when Chapman was only about 5 or 6, he was walking with his mother along a path. Like most little boys, he was fascinated by the flashlight and kept bugging his mother to be able to hold it. She finally agreed, but told him that it was not a toy, and that they needed it because of snakes. Well that freaked him out a bit. So he started shining the light off into the darkness of the underbrush and long grass along the side of the path looking for snakes. Quickly, his mother took the light back, demanding to know what he was doing. "I'm looking for snakes," he replied. "No," she said, "we are not looking for snakes. We are looking at the path ahead of us. As long as there is nothing ahead of us, we keep walking. If we see something, we stop. It will be afraid of the light and will go off into the dark. When the way ahead is safe, we will go on. But the light must always shine on the path ahead."<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> As quoted in illustrations under "light" listen in *Animating Illustrations Library*, HOMILETICSONLINE, [http://www.homileticonline.com/subscriber/illustration\\_search.asp?keywords=light](http://www.homileticonline.com/subscriber/illustration_search.asp?keywords=light).

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

Chapman learned from that experience that when we stare too intently into the darkness because we are afraid of possible snakes and monsters up ahead, we are not using the light of Christ to best our advantage, nor are we truly trusting in that light. The good news of the Gospel is that Jesus is with us now, and always will be. He is our flashlight, illuminating the safe way for us. When we get to the future, he will still be with us. Although it is true that the more we dwell in his light, the more we will be able to discern the monsters and the snakes around us, they are not what we are called to seek. We are called to use the light to walk on the safe path, so that now and in the future, the monsters and snakes will not harm us.

The author to *Ephesians* wanted to convey a similar message. So after talking about the importance of choosing light and being light, he added to those metaphors the idea of using time wisely so that people would use the light in the right way. “Make the most of the time because the days are evil,” he wrote. In the Greek, the word translated “make the most of,” (*exagorazo*, pronounced ex-ag-or-ad'-zo), is actually a commercial term typically used to refer to the practice of snapping up bargains in a market place. In the context of his advice about light, therefore, it would seem that he was saying something like this: “Look, you are right in your assessment that there is evil all around. People are lying and cheating and doing all kinds of works of darkness. But focusing on the bad things or obsessing about what might happen next isn’t making the darkness lighter in your lives or the world. It’s making it worse. So stop looking so intently at the darkness, (and/or seeking to distract yourself from your fear with the help of idols and indulgences.) Now is the time for you to choose the light and seek the light because the world clearly needs more light. So open your eyes. Be here, not somewhere else. Look around you, and you will see that the light of God is everywhere through Jesus Christ. Snap up that light like it’s the ultimate Black Friday bargain, and you have millions of relatives to shop for; because you do. You need to give light to the world. So fill yourselves with as much of the light as you can by seeking what is pleasing to God now, by worshiping and singing, doing good works, and sharing truth. In the light, you will find wisdom for the present, and hope for the future, for you, and for the world.”

One of the best examples I know of a faithful Christian who did this was Fred Rogers of *Mister Roger’s Neighborhood* fame. I have been learning more about him thanks to a documentary by Benjamin Wagner that recently came out on Amazon Prime; there is another one in the theaters as well. As I said in the beginning, Rogers was inspired by Lozoff’s image of the coal miner, in addition to his faith, to make his life about dwelling in faith and light in the present.<sup>5</sup> According to the people who knew him, either from doing “*Mister Roger’s Neighborhood*,” or from being his real neighbors, or from having correspondence with him, Roger’s greatest gift was his ability to dwell in the present in light. He made everyone who met him feel loved, valued, and heard, casting out the darkness around him and in them in the process. For example, during 1960’s, when racists were trying to prevent African American people from being allowed in the same community swimming pools with white people, Rogers invited an African American man to become the policeman for his imaginary neighborhood, an unprecedented act of racial inclusion for the time. Then in one of the episodes of his show,

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<sup>5</sup> *Mister Rogers & Me*, Documentary Directed by Benjamin Wagner, 2012, available on Amazon Prime, <http://www.amazon.com>.

Rogers invited the policeman to soak his feet in a kiddie pool with him on a hot day. Rogers never interpreted his actions on the show as a response to the conflict going on in the world. He just did what was right and true, sharing the light within him to that actor, and through the show, with the world. Another young man Rogers helped said that the first time he talked to him, Rogers asked “Do you know what matters to me more than anything right now?” “What?” the man asked, expecting a lecture or maybe even a celebrity brush off. “Talking to you,” Rogers said, and meant it.<sup>6</sup> He was fully present, confident that the best way to ensure the future would not be filled with darkness was to live Christ’s ways of love and grace in the present.

The next time you feel yourself panicking about the future, or threatened by the evil all around, instead of focusing on the darkness up ahead, try focusing on the light now. Take some time to read Scripture and pray every day, so that you will remember that the light is with you now and always will be. Then once your miner’s helmet is switched on, try to move through your days staying within the circumference of that light, whether you are dealing with a crisis at work or at home, stuck in traffic, or horrified by the news. Make your days about light gathering and light sharing, and I think you will find that you will be less fearful and more awake and hopeful. Christ has shown us the safest way into the future. All we have to do is take in the light he gives us, keep our eyes on the lit path in front of us, and move forward with Christ with mind, body and spirit together, one step at a time. Amen.

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<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*