

Sermon by Rev. Dr. Michael J. Hoyt
Glenshaw Presbyterian Church
Fourth Sunday in Lent
March 26th, 2006

On Being Afraid of the Dark

John 3:14-21

For those of you who pay attention to sermon titles
(some do, some don't)
the title of this sermon has changed from what's in the bulletin;
same passage, but different title and slightly different focus:
"On Being Afraid of the Dark"

Our son James, who recently turned 6,
can sometimes present a challenge at the dinner table:
there are many foods he doesn't care for,
and he has no reluctance in saying so (very politely!).
During the past several months, at dinner time,
James has been about his tummy hurting.
So Mary Ellen and I began to look for patterns
to see if we could discern some kind of food allergy.
The pattern we thought we observed was that
James – being an intelligent child, even shrewd at times –
complained of a tummy ache primarily on those nights
when dinner involved some food that
did not appeal to his discriminating taste.
Given no other symptoms,
and a quick recovery as soon as dinner was over,
we dismissed the tummy aches as the cunning tactic
of a 5 year old.

Until the other day, when – shortly after breakfast –
James confessed that he thought he knew why
his tummy was hurting at dinner time.
"It's because I'm afraid of the dark."
"But James," I said, "we eat with the lights on."
"Yes," he said, "but it's getting dark outside,
and it's getting close to bedtime."

Now James has always been a great sleeper –
he rarely ever complains when it's time to go to bed,
and he's usually out within 5 minutes of his head hitting the pillow.
And he's been quite used to sleeping without a nightlight.
But a nightlight seemed harmless enough,

and it would be interesting to see if the tummy aches would stop.

"James," I said, "That's OK.

There's nothing to be ashamed of in being afraid of the dark.
Everybody is, even grownups are a little bit afraid of the dark."

So now, at bedtime, instead of worrying about
the scary shadows in the closet,
we make funny animal shadows on the wall
from the light of the nightlight.

It is true, isn't it, that it's not just 6 year olds who are afraid of the dark?

They're just more likely to admit it.

Being afraid of the dark is probably a basic survival instinct
because we can't see what might be lurking out there,
in the closet, or under the bed, or in the basement,
or between the cars in the parking lot.

So we plug in nightlights, install outdoor security lights,
and expensive parking lot lighting.

But Jesus, in our reading from the Gospel of John,
says a curious thing: something counterintuitive:

*...the light has come into the world,
and people loved darkness rather than light...*

Why? Jesus says, *because their deeds were evil.*

Jesus turns the tables; he relocates the danger:

rather than the evil hiding out there,
lurking in the shadows, waiting to hurt us or even kill us,
Jesus says the evil, destructive thing is within us, a part of us,
something we want to hide from our own eyes,
and from the eyes of others,
and ultimately, from the eyes of God.

In essence, says Jesus: We are the boogey man!

And we are compelled to hide in the darkness
so that our shame is not exposed,
because we know deep down that the evil and danger
does not only lie waiting "out there," but "in here."

We know our own brokenness, our mistakes and misdeeds,
our wrong turns and dead ends,
how often we have failed at self-control,
how our words have injured others,
our lack of compassion.

It scares us to think just how many ways we must have offended God.

So it scares us to think of being fully exposed before God and the world.

Then God becomes even more intimidating than the dark.
Better to go bump in the night with other boogey men and women
like ourselves,
than to bump into the One
whose holy light will expose our brokenness and shame.

But to be afraid of God, while being comforted by the dark,
is to misjudge the danger of the darkness,
and worse, it is to misunderstand the heart of God.

In the comforting silliness of the Veggie Tales song,
Bob the Tomato and Larry the Cucumber sing to Junior,
(who I think is a small zucchini), that
"God is bigger than the boogey man,
bigger than Godzilla and the monsters on TV.
God is bigger than the boogey man,
...and God's watching out for you and me."

God is bigger than the boogey man –
that is, bigger than the worst of our sin and shame,
and that's a good thing.

It is a good thing because, in Jesus Christ, we know God's heart:
*For God so loved the world,
God sent the only Son
so that everyone who believes in him may not perish,
but have eternal life.*

We do not have to be afraid of being found out by God.
We have already been found.
We do not have to hide in the dark,
because we do not need to cover our shame before God.
For the thing we know about God and God's Son, is that
*... God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world,
but that the world might be saved through him.*
God IS watching out for you and me. God has our back!
THIS is the truth of the Gospel.

And to know and trust that this is who God really is:
this is the work of believing – and it can be hard work.

The Greek uses the present tense of *believing*,
which means continuing action.
It means "to keep on believing, to continue to believe."

It's not enough to buy the season tickets,
you have to keep on going to the games.
Jesus says, *Those who do what is true come to the light...*
Coming into the light, again and again, is the work of doing what is true,
it is the work of believing.

And Jesus says,
*Those who believe in him are not condemned;
but those who do not believe are condemned already,
because they have not believed in the name of the Son of God.*

Now let's don't get hung up here
about what to do with people who have never heard about Jesus,
and whether they are condemned unfairly.

Just remember, God loves them, too,
just as much as God loves those who have heard of Jesus –
we can trust God on that, and anyway,
that's not what this passage is about.

This passage is about those who *have* heard;
it's about people who *have* seen the light, *recognized* it as God's light,
and choose repeatedly to hide from the light.

It's about us, when we spend all our energy trying to justify ourselves,
rather than accepting our own humility before God and others.

It's about us, when we build up our own self-righteousness,
by being critical and judgmental of others.

It's about us, when we blame others for our own insecurities,
and scapegoat others in fear of our own shame.

It takes a lot of spiritual and emotional and physical energy
to hide from the light.

To hide from the light is to be imprisoned in the darkness;
it is to cower in the corner of a dark, dank room,
unable to move about in freedom because anywhere we turn,
the light will expose us.

Expose us, yes: but the light does not condemn us:

Fact is, we were already condemned;
were we already in the dark before the light came;
but in hiding from the light,
we condemn ourselves to continued darkness.

Lucy once said to Charlie Brown,
"Discouraged again, eh, Charlie Brown?
You know what your whole trouble is?
The whole trouble with you is that *you're you!*"

Charlie asks: "Well, what in the world can I do about that?"

Lucy answers: "I don't pretend to give out advice...
...I merely point out the trouble."

Another time, Lucy says,

"You know what the whole trouble with you is , Charlie Brown?"

Charlie answers: "NO, and I don't want to know! Leave me alone!"
He walks away.

Lucy shouts after him:

"The whole trouble with you is
you won't listen to what the whole trouble with you is!"

Unlike Lucy, God offers a way out of the darkness.
Come into the light. Acknowledge what the trouble with you is.
Come, just as you are, without one plea about your own righteousness,
just as you are, and let God love you.

If your darkness has become a place to hide from God's healing light,
perhaps you *should* be afraid of the dark.
So why not confess this to God.
Tell God about that uneasy feeling in the pit of your stomach.
Let God come to your bedside. Let the Son of God be your nightlight.
And you and God can make playful shadows on the wall,
perhaps the shadow of a bird set free in flight,
as you imagine a new way of being the one
God created you to be.