

Paul Walker CEC 11/28/10 Isaiah 2:1-5
“Cast Away the Works of Darkness”

William Golding’s 1954 novel, *Lord of the Flies*, remains a piercing and I believe, accurate judgment of human nature. In wartime, a group of English schoolboys are the only survivors of a plane crash on a paradisiacal, yet deserted Island. They have no choice but to govern themselves.

It starts out well enough. The boys are happy to free from adult restraint – they play on the beach and swim in the ocean. They elect leaders and formulate a plan for survival and rescue. One group of boys is in charge of hunting for food, another group is in charge of keeping the rescue fire going.

Well, boys will be boys, right? Their attempt to govern themselves ends in disaster. They spend more time playing than working. The fire goes out. Factions arise. Fights break out. They resort to their most savage and violent instincts. Boys kill other boys.

The novel ends with the arrival of a British Naval Officer. When the remaining boys see him on the beach, they break down sobbing. They sob with relief at their rescue and they sob in humiliation and sadness at what they have done to themselves and one another. The Naval Officer turns away, allowing the boys to get themselves together. He says he expected more from properly educated British boys.

I hope you will forgive me for beginning this sermon on such a dark note. I realize that outside these church walls that Christmas Has Begun. After all, Santa Himself was at the Omni on November 20th. I’m all for Santa. And I’m even more for Eggnog. I will not strike a dark note at a Christmas party. Out there, I hope that you too will fa-la-la with the best of them. But in here, inside the walls of Christ Church, it is not Christmas yet. It is Advent. And make no mistake - Advent begins in the dark. And be forewarned: this is an Advent sermon, hence it is a dark sermon.

We have just prayed, “*Almighty God, give us grace to cast away the works of darkness.*” The Romans reading also talks about the “works of darkness.” In our gospel reading, Jesus speaks about the Son of Man returning like a thief in the dark of night. And our reading from Isaiah, from which I will be preaching, looks to a time when the darkness will be cast away, urging us to “*walk in the light of the Lord.*”

In the bible, like in most literature, darkness is an obvious metaphor for blindness, for sin, for lostness, confusion, and despair. Ironically, the darkness of the world is easy to see on every level. As G.K. Chesterton once said, "*original sin is the only empirically demonstrable Christian doctrine.*" All you have to do is look around.

We get the Economist Magazine every week. We like it because it gives us a short but thorough tour of the world's news. Sadly, weekly world tour is almost always a dark one. For instance, the most recent issues reports fighting in Bangladesh, bird flu in Hong Kong, hundreds trampled to death in Cambodia, the collapse of Ireland's economy due to greedy bankers, and the ever-present violence in the Middle East. And that is just the first column of the first page. The "works of darkness" are all around.

But of course you don't have to read the Economist or even look outward to see the works of darkness. All I have to do is look at my own dark heart. It is easy to see the judgment and the criticism that live there. It is easy to see the lust and the anger that live there. It is easy to see the fear and the unbelief that live there. To "cast off the works of darkness" would be to evict so much of what so comfortably inhabits my dark heart.

Original sin may be the only empirically demonstrable Christian doctrine, but I find that people violently resist its claims. Lord of the Flies was deeply criticized for being too dark, for taking too negative a view of human nature. You hear it all the time – whenever you call somebody a "good person." Oh – he is a good person, she is a good person, those people in the heartland – they are just good people. Jesus CLEARLY says in the bible that NOBODY is good except God alone. That quote does remind me of my current favorite lawyer joke.

Q: When lawyers die, why are they buried 12 feet rather than 6 feet in the ground?

A: Because deep down they are really good people!

I remember talking with a very secular and accomplished young woman about the dark human heart, making honest references to my own dark heart and the difficulty of love in any marriage, including my own. I thought that maybe I had gotten through to her, for the sake of the gospel. A week or so later I asked her brother what she thought of our talk. He laughed and said, "*Paul, she is worried about you. She thinks you have self-esteem problems and that your marriage is falling apart!*"

Last summer I presided over a wedding in a spectacularly beautiful

setting in the Vermont Mountains. The bride and groom were both spectacularly beautiful and accomplished people as were all their family and friends. It was 68 degrees with no humidity; cows were peacefully lowing in the distance. The hills were alive with the sound of music and the language of love.

I then got up and preached a sermon about their dark hearts and their inability to love each other in their own strength and how no spouse is ultimately trustworthy in himself or herself. Their only hope was to be found in Jesus Christ. Well, what a buzz kill! Wasn't I the fly in the punch bowl. Nobody talked to me the entire reception. Even Christie got up and moved to another table! At least the food was good.

Who really wants to hear the bible's news that the works of darkness that need to be cast off originate in our own hearts? Most people believe that deep down we are really good people, and that all we need is a little education, a little life coaching, a little positive thinking.

Well, to that argument, I would posit the Lord of the Flies, the Economist Magazine, an honest tour through your own heart, the clear and plain words of Jesus Christ, and the gruesome witness of century after bloody century. History cries out against us: we cannot successfully govern ourselves. Yes, thankfully, there are pockets of success. There are instances of peace. But, in the end, we are like 13 year old boys stranded on a dark island in need of light and rescue. That's why I would never leave a young couple heading into marriage leaning on their own devices. What a cruel thing to do.

Give us grace to cast away the works of darkness. The bible is clear about where the darkness comes from. We live in darkness when we refuse to be governed by God. We live in darkness when we do not accept God's authority over our lives. We live in darkness when we believe that we are our own judges. This is the essence of original sin.

This is what Paul says in Romans, although "*they knew God, they did not honor Him as God or give thanks to Him, but they became futile in their thinking and their foolish hearts were darkened.*" So called freedom from God's authority leads not to freedom but to tyranny. It leads to the will to power. It leads to violence and the subjection of weak and the powerless. It leads to foolish and darkened hearts. Ultimately, it leads us to the darkness of hell.

To be delivered from darkness, we need is someone to rescue us, to

govern us, to bring us light. In the words of Isaiah, we need someone to “teach us his ways that we may walk in his paths.” We need someone to “judge between the nations” and “arbitrate for many peoples.” We need someone who will make us “turn our swords into plowshares and our spears in to pruning hooks.” Even the swords we use against those who are closest to us.

Advent begins in the dark and yearns for the light. Advent aches for the day when we shall not learn war anymore. Advent yearns for as we pray today, “the last day, when Jesus Christ shall come in his glorious majesty to judge both the living and the dead”. And when He comes, will shall sob. Sob with relief at his return. Sob with humiliation and sadness at what we have done to one another. But He shall not turn away to let us get ourselves together. He shall gather us up in his arms, with laughter in his eyes, and rise with us to the life immortal. And our dark hearts will no longer be dark. Our deepest desire will be to be ruled by Him, who rules with grace. We will love him, because He has loved us.

We may long for His judgment and His authority because He once visited us in great humility. The darkness of your heart beckoned him and he came for you. Wche who are baptized into Him may long for Him from the darkness. Why? The words of a French Reformed baptismal liturgy expresses it best:

“Little child, for you Jesus Christ has come, he has fought, he has suffered. For you He entered the shadow of Gethsemane and the horror of Calvary. For you he uttered the cry “It is finished!” For you he rose from the dead and ascended into heaven and there he intercedes for you little child, even though you do not know it. But in this way the word of the Gospel becomes true. “We love Him, because He first loved us.”