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Date: February 13, 2022
Sermon: "Jesus DOESN'T Want You for
a Sunbeam"
Pastor: Rev. David Johnson Rowe
Scripture: Scripture Litany of Light

Scripture Litany of Light

Leader: And God let there be light, and there was light. (*Genesis 1:3*)

Congregation: *God saw that the light was good.* (*Genesis 1:4*)

Leader: The people walking in darkness have seen a great light;
on those living in the shadow of death a light has dawned."
(*Isaiah 9:2*)

Congregation: "This is the message we declare to you: God is light; in God
there is no darkness at all."
(*1 John 1:5*)

Leader: "Do not gloat over me, my enemy. Though I have fallen, I will
rise. Though I sit in darkness, the Lord will be my light."
(*Micah 7:8*)

Congregation: *The night is nearly over; the day is almost here. So let us put
aside the deeds of darkness and put on the armor of light.*
(*Romans 13:12*)

Together: *You are the light of the world . . . Let your light shine so that
people will see our good deeds and praise God in heaven.*
(*Matthew 5:14,16*)

Song "Jesus Wants Me for a Sunbeam"

*Jesus wants me for a sunbeam,
To shine for Him each day;
In ev'ry way try to please Him,
At home, at school, at play.*

*[Refrain: A sunbeam, a sunbeam,
Jesus wants me for a sunbeam:
A sunbeam, a sunbeam,
I'll be a sunbeam for Him.*

*Jesus wants me to be loving,
And kind to all I see;
Showing how pleasant and happy,
His little one can be. [Refrain]*

Sermon

“Jesus DOESN'T Want You
for a Sunbeam”

David Johnson Rowe

In a sermon where I'm shamelessly plugging my new book, it's probably bad marketing to begin by quoting a previous book. It was the first book I published as your pastor, *Fieldstones of Faith*, a collection of poems based on Bible verses.

My favorite poem is based on one of our Church's favorite Scriptures, where St. John describes Jesus this way: *“In the beginning was the Word and the Word was God. The Word became flesh and lived among us. In him was life, and his life was the light of the world. That light shines in the darkness and the darkness cannot overcome it.”*

In my poem, I riff off that “darkness vs. light” contrast and that imagery, using a variety of references from when light enters the darkness. Here's the poem:

“The Light Shines in the Darkness . . .” (John 1:1-5)

A candle
set up on a hill
for all the city to see

a railway man's lantern
breaking through the night mist
signaling all is well
for the journey*

a shooting star
or the first rays of dawn
breaking a dark night's spell

the sun
edging through storm clouds
and a rainbow's "yes" to life

a porch light
its welcoming glow
inviting the stranger
to feel at home

a lighthouse beam
dispelling danger
pointing toward safe harbor

a kind hello
a friendly wave
a hearty gesture
all unexpected treasure

a glimpse of heaven
a touch of earth
a hint of smile
a surprising guest for the extra mile

". . . and the Darkness cannot overcome it."

*(Rivas, Manuel. *The Carpenter's Pencil*. Overlook Press, 2001, p.72)

The inspiration for the poem came from a childhood memory. Our neighborhood in Queens began a sort of "neighborhood watch" program with a simple plan. At night, every house on the block turned off its porch light, every house except one.

The deal was that the family whose turn it was to keep the porch light on left the front door unlocked and stayed up all night . . . just in case. So at 10 o'clock at night or midnight or 1 AM, you're walking home from a school dance, or you just got off the subway, or you're headed home after working a late-night shift, and you hear footsteps. You're nervous, you look down the block and see that one house, the one house with the porch light on, knowing the door is unlocked, that a neighbor is staying up late waiting just for you. The light drives you away from fear to a place of safety and welcome. That's the power of light over darkness.

It is that dramatic, universal, epic juxtaposition between darkness and light that led to today's strange chapter and sermon title, "Jesus *Doesn't* Want Me for a Sunbeam." Let me tell you the story.

The summer before Covid struck, Alida and I went to Kraków, Poland, an ancient beautiful city unscarred by World War II devastation except . . . except that Auschwitz, the gigantic, horrific Holocaust death mill is just an hour away.

Auschwitz literally and figuratively and historically and emotionally hovers over Kraków. Kraków was also home to Schindler's factory (made famous by the "Schindler's List" movie), a factory that employed and saved hundreds of Jews from extermination.

So, one day, Alida and I devoted ourselves to Kraków's Holocaust trail. Schindler's factory has been turned into an excellent, disturbing museum of Nazi occupation in Kraków.

After the museum, we walked to the main Holocaust Memorial, a classic Eastern European plaza but stunningly littered with sculptured chairs in disarray all across the plaza, symbolizing the hasty, chaotic expulsion of Jews from their homes and apartments into a Jewish ghetto.

The ghetto was built by Jews, with walls purposefully made to look like Jewish cemetery headstones. On the walk to the ghetto, we saw this graffiti on a wall, in English: "Jesus DOESN'T Want Me for a Sunbeam." It stopped me dead in my tracks. Because . . . well, as you just saw a moment ago when we sang that little children's hymn, "Jesus WANTS me . . . WANTS me for a Sunbeam." It's a cute, positive, lighthearted, joyful, happy, happy, happy song, perhaps the most popular Christian children's song in America!

Our Children's Choir was working on it just before Covid hit. So tell me . . . what was that graffiti writer thinking? "Jesus DOESN'T want . . . does NOT want me, or you, for a sunbeam"?

Obviously the writer had to know the original, the happy kids' song in order to mock it and reject it. That's a mocking version, "Jesus *DOESN'T* Want Me for a Sunbeam," that's a song made famous by Kurt Cobain of Nirvana, from their "Unplugged Concert" on MTV, a cover song of another band, The Vaselines.

Here are the lyrics:

*"Jesus doesn't want me for a Sunbeam
'cause sunbeams are not made like me.
And don't expect me to cry
for all the reasons you had to die.
Don't ever ask your love of me."*

That's darkness, the power of darkness laid bare right there around Holocaust Square.

In the book, I wonder out loud about the graffiti writer's motivation. As hard as it is to swallow, the Holocaust was rooted in Christianity. Absurd Christianity, yes. Warped Christianity, sure. But still rooted. Centuries of calling Jews "Christ killers," centuries of ghettoizing Jews, literally; centuries of scapegoating Jews for every problem in Europe.

And who executed the Holocaust? Almost anyone who took part, actively or passively, in every nation involved was some sort of baptized, confirmed Protestant or Catholic. A Christian in name, at least.

Our anonymous graffiti writer was not impressed by two thousand years of such light-spreading Sunbeam Christians. So he's singing, "I don't want anything to do with that . . . or them . . . or him. Not even with Jesus." That's hard to hear, isn't it?

Somewhere in the new book I express pride in our little Church—a Church of unfailingly nice people doing unstoppable good things.

Alida and I serve you with immense joy. You make us proud every day, as we all try to bring a little light into the world. And that's the choice we all face every day. Are we going to darken the corner where we live, or brighten it? Shall we turn the light on when darkness threatens? Or snuff it out? Or in the language of the age-old saying, shall we light a candle or curse the darkness?

In this series of sermons based on the book, I usually talk through the chapter, highlighting and summarizing the 15 or so pages. I'm less inclined to do that today. We've already looked at my Holocaust graffiti story, and much of the rest of Chapter 6 dwells on evidence of darkness in our world, the things that upset us, infuriate us, hurt us.

Toward the end I state that Christianity exists in large part to address two of the big darkneses of life: sin and death. Sins are things we do that we know we shouldn't do, that aren't good for us, that cause trouble, that are damaging and hurtful and wrong and just plain ungodly. Anti-Godly. And we know it. Yet, they have a hold on us. We can't seem to shake loose. Or we stop one sin, only to pick up a new one. That's the power of darkness, and we stumble around in it. Into that darkness steps Jesus with the promise of forgiveness, the willingness to keep the porch light on until we're safe.

And the other darkness is death, the great, overwhelming sorrow that shrouds us when we are confronted by the deaths of dear ones, and when our own

mortality is all too clear. Death can almost feel like a literal darkness. We even talk about the "spark of life" being extinguished. The power of darkness. Into that darkness steps the Jesus of Easter with the promise of resurrection, and of heaven, and of reunion.

Today I've taken you from leaving the porch light on to the Holocaust. Most of us spend our lives closer to leaving the porch light on than to being a sunbeam in the midst of the Holocaust.

Truth is, sunbeams come in all sorts of ways. Those American soldiers, 19, 20 years old, battle-scarred, grizzled veterans that liberated the death camps of World War II Europe, they streamed into those places like sunbeams, I have no doubt.

This week we sat with a dear friend remembering the memorial service for his loved one, and he said to us, "Thank you for arranging a sunny day! Did you see the sunlight coming through the Church windows? How during the service the sunlight moved along with us? It was beautiful."

That's where I prefer this sermon to go. Not to the power of darkness, but to the presence of light. You read along with all those Scriptures earlier. They all attested to the presence of light, its inherent goodness, its comforting reassurance, its very Christlikeness, so much so that there's a verse in the Book Revelation that tells us that in heaven there's no need for lights: no chandeliers, no street lamps, no candles, not even the sun or the moon. Instead, God is light. God is radiant. God is our porch light. God is our sunbeam.

Until then, well, that's our job. In every situation do we brighten the corner where we live? Or do we darken the horizon for everyone? Do we try to listen . . . or add to the noise? Do we build up or tear down? Do we choose affirmation or criticism? Good, or evil? Light or darkness?

The Wall Street Journal recently carried a complicated but sweet story on the op-ed page by a Journal columnist, William McGurn. He's a Notre Dame grad, and he wrote about a Notre Dame classmate, Joe, who fell on hard times. A life of mental illness took its toll; homelessness set in. What was a life of promise never materialized, and he died, too young, in a homeless shelter. But in the years of his struggle, and even in death, his Notre Dame classmates and dorm-mates found ways to "show some love and care." And when he died, they all chipped in to buy him a burial plot and a headstone for the cemetery at Notre Dame, right on Notre Dame Avenue, buried right next to one of Notre Dame's greatest football coaches, Ara Parseghian.

The columnist ended his column this way: "Some might wonder if all this effort for a burial is a meaningless gesture. His friends would disagree. They know full well what Joe's life was like and how he died. They just don't believe death has the last word on Joe. Hope tells them that whatever Joe suffered in life, Joe is now in a place where he knows how very much he was—and is—loved."

McGurn, William. "An Ordinary Joe's Christmas." *The Wall Street Journal*. December 21, 2021, p. A17.

Darkness is real; let's not sugarcoat it. Mental illness is darkness. Homelessness is darkness. Death is darkness. All real. But so is the light. When we light a candle. When we keep the porch light on. When we give a little dignity to a man who can give nothing back. When we choose an Easter faith. We are sunbeams.

My heart aches for the graffiti writer in Kraków. Beaten down by the harsh realities of a cruel world, living in the shadows of Auschwitz, offended by the failures of our Christian religion, he tossed in the towel, believing and declaring, "Jesus doesn't want us for a sunbeam."

My response in the book to that cynicism may be too flip, but I believe it.

I write, "Maybe the graffiti writer and the Vaselines and Kurt Cobain need a hug. Maybe more sunbeams in Poland or Germany back in the dark days of yesteryear, or now, would light up enough dark corners to brighten a whole room. Or church. Or town. Or nation. Or more.

So I'm still willing to sing that sappy old children's song. I'm still glad when sunlight streams through our Church windows. I'm still willing to light a candle in our little prayer candle stand whenever something in life darkens our day.

I still believe that we are "the light of the world." Thanks to you.