

“Doing It to Ourselves”
Isaiah 59:1-10, II Corinthians 4:1-6, John 3:16-21
December 8, 2019

The late Russell Baker, the Pulitzer Prize winning journalist, died earlier this year. One of his more striking pieces was an article published some time ago on the greyness of New England this time of year. The sky is overcast more often than not, the ground soon grows grey with dirty snow, the woolens come out, and it is Puritan time in the northeast once again.

Thanksgiving, Baker wrote, is the last gasp for color in this somber world of ours. There’s bright yellow squash, warm orange pumpkin pie, rich brown turkey, burgundy red cranberry sauce. But soon the world will go grey, as New England settles in for a long winter’s nap. So wrote Baker in one of his more emotive, evocative pieces.

But in many lives, in many places, and yet for one basic reason, the greyness will not hold sway, nor will it have the final word. And that is symbolized by the lighting of the candles of Advent: first one early in the season, and as the world grows yet more somber, then another candle, a third, and a fourth ... until at a time when the world is at its gloomiest, the candles of purple and pink are joined by the great white candle at the center of the wreath. And from that candle of light, many other lights become lit in the hearts, souls, and minds of those who would cluster around and find in that light the source of all spiritual warmth.

But there will be many others who will not come. What will happen to them? There are many who prefer the greyness, the dullness, the bleakness of a life without light, an existence centered on self instead of reaching out and striving for something more excellent. There are many who do not even know that they are blind in spirit. And for many, the shadows may be cold, but they are seemingly secure, for it lets them nurture what they would rather others not see. Besides, if all they have known are mists and obscurity, they could be scared of what might lie beyond it. Like children in the

womb, they are loathe to come out, to breathe freely, to face Reality, to be challenged by a world that does not find Self at its center.

Thus, so many of us cut ourselves off, retreating into the dimness, into the false security of Self, not realizing that we cannot begin to know ourselves if we do not come to know others.

What does it mean, to cut ourselves off? From the Biblical point of view, to wrap ourselves up, to fail to respond to others, to ignore signs of wonder in the land, sea, and sky around us, is nothing short of catastrophic. It is to remain veiled, to limit ourselves, to fail to realize our potential, to run from the best of what we can be, from what we were intended to be.

And so the prophets, the priests, and the poets of scripture wrote of this catastrophe in the most shocking of images. They did not want such an awful separation to befall anyone of us. And so we read of lakes of burning fire, of the hideous shades of Hades, of mountains falling on peoples' heads, of the moon turning to blood, of wars, of earthquakes, of ruin and desolation - all because of our failure to turn towards the Light.

Given our human predisposition to dwell on the ugly and the bizarre, our minds sometimes become riveted on these cataclysmic scenes of divine punishment, of vengeful angels, of beasts with seven heads and ten horns, of a Lamb who spits fire and from whose mouth proceeds a two-edged sword. And it is these images which have turned so many people away from the truths of the Gospel, for they say, "How can a God of love, a God of light, a God of mercy, visit all these events upon His own creatures?"

They miss the point. They are like children who ignore the warning of adults not to put their fingers in the electric socket, and then when they do get a shock, they blame their parents for it. But then, we are predisposed to shooting the messenger, are we not?

Sometimes we fall into the trap of paying too much attention to how something is said instead of what is being said and why it is being said. We're into the

attention-grabbing headlines, of cosmic words like “salvation” and “damnation,” of “heaven” and “hell,” without actually reading the story behind it all.

And what is that story? Here is how John’s Gospel explains it: “This is the condemnation, that light is come into the world, and we loved darkness rather than light.” The way I read that, it is that we condemn ourselves. In fact, that is exactly how Isaiah puts it: “The Lord’s arm is NOT too short to save, nor His ear too dull to hear; rather, it is our iniquities that raise a barrier between us and our God; it is our sins that veil God’s face, so that He does not hear.”

If some of us seem to be living in a haze, it is not because God wants our lives to be that way; it is because we do not seek the Light. If we feel alienated, it is not because God has cut us off from His presence, but because we have wandered far afield. If we cannot understand, it is not because God would hold us in ignorance, but because our cluttered minds, filled as they are with too many inessentials, have no room in them for enlightenment. It is we who judge ourselves. It is we who condemn ourselves because we choose something other than what is the best, the truest, the most real, the divine: because we are constantly faced with a choice, and all too often we have chosen obscurity rather than clarity, death instead of life.

A visitor was being shown around an art gallery by one of the attendants. In that gallery there were a number of masterpieces beyond all price, possessions of eternal beauty and unquestioned genius. At the end of the tour, the visitor said, “Well, I don’t think much of your old pictures.” The attendant answered quietly, “Sir, I would remind you that these pictures are no longer on trial ... but those who look at them, are.”

So it is with the Light of the world, sent in love. Our reaction to that Light is what judges us. If we are condemned, it is not because God has condemned us, for God only loves us. We have condemned ourselves.

Of course, it is often not an either-or proposition. There are so many reactions to the Light that is come into this grey world of ours. Some of us are mildly curious. Some

enjoy the thrill of the season from late November through New Years, but then pack it all away in the attics of our lives. Some of us think that the Light is only for children.

Others think that this talk of light and grey and shadows is so simplistic that it is not worthy of even the effort to turn our heads.

If that is the case with anyone here, or with anyone that we know, well, let it not be the last word given on the subject. Perhaps our brief dismissal of the coming Light has left some nagging doubts in our minds. Maybe the sight of the joy and the magic in a child's eyes will lead us back to what we once knew, if that has now grown cold, dim, and grey with age.

For the Season is upon us. The Light grows. It will not be hidden - no, not here. Not in the hearts of those who love. Not in the minds and souls of those who are still child-like, able to see the wonder, and the glory. May the light so shine in our lives, that others may be drawn to it, that at last all darkness might be cast out.

Let us pray: