

Dark and Light in 2021

Psalm 133
I John 1:5-2:2

Psalm 133 speaks of Aaron, Moses' brother. Aaron was the first Hebrew priest. Leviticus 8 gives us the picture of his ordination, in which Moses pours “anointing oil” on Aaron's head so copiously it runs down his beard and robe. Today we perform the ordination of two elders. They may perhaps be glad we do not use oil in this way! Nevertheless, our rite of ordination does hearken back to this ancient ritual. In non-pandemic times we use the laying on of hands. Both that and anointing with oil symbolize the setting apart of a person for a special ministry.

The Psalm gives us a second image of a blessed liquid flowing down, the “dew of Hermon” falling on the mountains of Zion. Hermon lies on the Syria/Lebanon border and is the highest mountain in the eastern Mediterranean region. Its snow cap is visible from much of Israel. Due to local meteorological factors, dew falls with such volume on Hermon it blends over into the category of rain. Every regional language has its own proverb about the dews of Hermon. The author of the Psalm pictures that kind of water falling on the arid mountains of Zion, of Israel. What a blessing to Hebrew farmers that would be!

But what does the Psalmist use these two liquid blessings—anointing oil and

heavy dew—to illustrate? Dwelling together in unity. Fellowship. “Behold, how good and pleasant it is when brothers (and sisters) dwell together in unity!” Unity, fellowship, communion—they bless us like the oil of ordination. They bless us like rain falling on parched land. Never have we needed to hear this more than in 2021.

Voting rights. Immigration. Black Lives Matter. Lockdowns to combat the virus. Climate change. Abortion. Cancel culture. People are making money and taking power by employing the age-old strategy of dividing us. They use these and other issues to wind us up and aim us at each other. Now here comes an obligatory disclaimer. I am **not** advocating that we have no opinions about these or any issues. I have my own opinions on all of them. No, the point for us in the church is that the Word of God calls us to unity; not uniformity. The Word calls us to disagree in love. The Word calls us to reflect the light of Christ on a darkening world. The Word calls us, in the wonderful phrasing of the Presbyterian ordination vows, to maintain the Spirit of unity in the bond of peace.

The use of division to make money and take power is indeed nothing new. What **is** new, at least to my perception, is the pervasive fear we feel in today's disunity. More than one member of this church has told me they physically fear people on the other side of the divide. Physically fear. And these comments have come from people on each side. Now a second disclaimer: I see legitimate reasons to feel fear on all sides. What's more, I cannot criticize what people feel. I take it on faith that their fear is real. Whether they ought to feel it is a meaningless question. The question we

need to ask ourselves is what does God call us to do in such a time of division?

The answer lies in I John 1:7: “But if we walk in the light, as (God) is in the light, we have fellowship with one another and the blood of Jesus the Son cleanses us from all sins.” For John, the most poetic of all the New Testament authors, “light” has a poetic range of meanings. In the Gospel and the three letters he wrote “light” can mean perfection, power, holiness, guidance, even the “Aha!” experience of having an entirely new thought. When he writes, “God is light” he includes all of the above (with the probable exception of Aha!). If we say we have fellowship with God’s perfection, power, holiness and guidance then we had better be telling the truth. For if we say it while walking in darkness, we lie. We sin. Of course not a one of us can honestly claim to be holy as the God of light is holy. John writes, “If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves.” But if we walk in the light, if we make a persistent effort to walk the talk of Jesus, he will “forgive us and cleanse us from all unrighteousness.” Our walk in the light will never be perfect, yet our attempt keeps us “in Christ”, who John concludes, is the **expiation** of our sins.

From a root that conveys the thought of “throwing out”, expiation means to atone, to make whole, to repair **by throwing out sin and its consequences**. Jesus became our expiation, our relief from the debt we owe God for our sins, on the cross. We walk in the light because it makes us eligible for this infinite blessing. We walk in the light because we feel gratitude for it. We walk in the light because it makes fellowship possible, fellowship with each other and fellowship with our Creator.

Among other things, walking in the light in 2021 means staying in genuine fellowship with our sisters and brothers no matter where they sit on the dividing issues of the day. Walking in the light means that we *listen* to one another. Patiently and intently. It means considering the experiences that have formed others differently than we have been formed. At the most fundamental level, it means striving to see all as fellow children of God, forgiven sinners, beloved.

Of course some on all sides will continue to mock, disparage, even threaten others. So be it. Jesus told us to turn our cheeks and yes, he means it even when the ones “striking” us are unfair, foolish, enraged, or from our perspective, completely wrong. Walking in the light requires that we stay in fellowship with all in the church. And so, a final disclaimer: I am the pot calling the kettle not to get black. I struggle with maintaining fellowship just as much as anybody. I judge people in my cold little heart. I do not presume to preach this message from a superior position. Quite the contrary. Yet preach it I must. I believe God has called me to draw out from the Word whatever message it contains. In I John 1 and 2 I see this message: walk in the light. Stay in fellowship, fellowship with one another and fellowship with God, and you will be forgiven your sins, including the sin of division.

Please do not hear this sermon as a call to sit on our hands as major issues divide and inflame our country. It is a call, rather, to maintain fellowship in the church no matter what you think, believe and do about these things. A group of eight white southern Christian and Jewish leaders published a letter, The Call for Unity, criticizing

Martin Luther King Jr. for his leadership in the non-violent protests of segregation in the early '60s. He was in jail when he read it, hence we know his work as The Letter from the Birmingham jail. In it he patiently and irresistibly demolishes their every point. To take one example, they had written that “now is not the time, when passions are already so inflamed, to organize and to hold public demonstrations.” In reply King wrote, “For years now I have heard, 'Wait!'...This 'Wait!' has almost always meant, 'Never!' We must come to see, with one of our distinguished jurists, that 'Justice too long delayed is justice denied.’”

King's assassination was a tragedy on many levels. But perhaps the deepest damage it caused was the loss of his principled, theological leadership in insisting that the Civil Rights movement press forward *non-violently*. And he did this while having to hold off more radical Civil Rights leaders who understandably wanted to turn the movement into a violent crusade. By moral force and intellect King prevailed until his death. For example, upon his release from the Birmingham jail he received a personal letter from Edward V. Ramage, the Moderator of the Synod of Alabama, and the only Presbyterian signer of The Call for Unity. Ramage expressed his admiration for King's letter, and regret for his participation in creating the open letter. He asked to meet King. History apparently cannot verify whether they ever did meet. The King Library in Atlanta, however, has the original of King's written reply to Ramage. It contains these words: “I would gladly meet with you—as I would with any of your brothers. For we are all God's children and the Lord we serve calls us to remain in fellowship.”

So think what you will. Work for justice as you see it. But do not allow the dividers among us to pull you away from your sisters and brothers in the fellowship of the church. Indeed, we ought all to strive to maintain our bonds with all people. That is how we walk in the light in 2021.