

New St. James Presbyterian Church
Fourth Sunday in Lent
Sunday, March 10, 2024

“Light or Darkness, Salvation or Redemption”

Guest Minister: Rev. Linda Robinson

On Wednesday evening, there was a documentary or docudrama on Women’s television network called “Profile.” I had ignored it but not finding anything else of real interest, I decided to see what it was about. I was soon spellbound and stayed up later than planned to watch the rest of the program.

I had tuned in towards the end of the program and discovered a young British woman in a hijab talking via her computer to a man in Syria. She was apparently a new convert to Islam and being “recruited” as a bride for this Muslim man who had been raised in Britain. As his bride she would join him and support him in his fight in Syria.

I soon realized this woman was working on a project to expose this bride recruiting network. She was trying to discover the technique used to recruit these young women and the route they took to get to Syria. The group hoped to rescue them and stop them from getting into a situation from which they could never return. But despite her hesitancy and questions, it was apparent the British man now living in Syria had no intention of telling “Amy” the full details of how she would get to Syria.

Finally, after a suitable length of time for a modest young Muslim woman, she agreed to marry him, and asked what she next needed to do next. She was instructed to purchase a ticket to Amsterdam where she was to go to a small hotel. Once there she was to phone a particular number and she would then be met and guided to Syria from Amsterdam.

During one of her many computer conversations, she discovered her phone was dead, and without thinking she used a different phone to connect the call. This one misstep allowed the man to discover her true identity, her age - 26, not 20 and her address in London. Then at the beginning one of their calls, Amy watches as the man tries to talk and take part in a military attack at the same time, watches as he is suddenly injured or killed. Amy blamed herself because she had kept him on the call when he tried to end it. And despite the deception on her part, she is very upset - sure he has died.

As she thought about all that had happened just before the armed confrontation, Amy remembered there had been an Arabic discussion with another man during a 3-way conversation about her trip to Syria. She had been introduced to the man – in Arabic and despite her requests, during and after the conversation, she never received any real understanding of what had been said.

She decided to get a proper, trustworthy translation of the recorded conversation into English and uncovers the fact the men are joking together because this is the 3rd young woman that month, the former British Muslim man had recruited to go to Syria as a bride. Using his first name, the only name she knew, his picture and the fact he had said he had a brother in a British prison the group Amy was working with, discovered this British born Muslim man already had 2 wives in Syria and several sons, and he had faked the fight and put out a fatwa on Amy’s life, giving her real name and address – he was very much alive and well.

When Amy contacted the police, they told her to change her name and move. All this occurred 3 years ago, in 2021.

How easy it is for young people women and men to be drawn to a new religion, adventure, danger, excitement, travel, something new away from Mom and Dad. And while we know Amy was not really being drawn into this life, we know that other young women and men have been and are to this day. And it has been reported that the Canadian government has been very, very reluctant to allow these young women or men and their children, back into Canada if they want to return home.

Our reading from the Gospel according to John seems to be a conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus, a Rabbi and Pharisee.

It is a discussion that speaks of God's saving grace during the Exodus. The Israelites were saved from the bite of poisonous snakes by looking up at the bronze snake, which was "lifted up" high on a pole so it could be seen, and if they looked at it after being bitten, they lived. It is also a discussion that states "the Son of Man" must also be lifted up, or more clearly "the Son of Man" must be crucified and must also ascend, so those who believe on the Son of Man might receive the gift of eternal life.

And in this manner the conversation continues. Remember Nicodemus is a rabbi, he knows scripture well, in fact, he begins his exchange with Jesus, assuming they are equals -both rabbis. But they are not equals and Nicodemus had much to learn. Just as we have much to learn as we read scripture or listen to sermons. We are to think about what we are being told, reading, learning and reflect on our own lives and the life of our congregation, our denomination. And we are to listen and learn from God, how we might follow Christ here and now.

About 30 years ago I was filling in at a Bible Study while the minister was away. There had been a number of home invasions and brazen street attacks here in London. And following the scripture and the questions of the Study, I asked the people in the group how they could be a light amid this violence. They looked at me astounded and said, "This violence has nothing to do with us." They also told the minister that they were very upset with me for even suggesting such violence had anything to do with them.

But it does. Over the last couple of years, I have read in the paper about a minister who had helped others, was stabbed and killed by someone he had helped. And I have heard about a young couple and others here in Old South attacked and injured during a home invasion just because they were at home. We currently live in a world where young women and young men are enticed or forced into dangerous and often violent lives. It is not new of course but we hear so much more about it. We live in a world where profit over ethics or the environment or the good of people takes precedent. We live in a world where lies are easily believed and spread far and wide.

And yet we know that is not the world we wish to be a part of, we know that is not the world God created for us, nor is it the world God desires for us. Our passage speaks of darkness yes, but its true message is of light, salvation, eternal life, all gifts from God. The Gospel reading also speaks of our decisions, our understanding of how to live our lives in the light of God's love for us and for the world. The writer of John tells us that it is our actions, our behaviour, our way of living which judges and condemns us.

This passage is not just about others, it is about us. We need to check our own behaviour towards those we say we love, we need to look to Christ to illumine for us the path to true faithfulness, a path that brings hope not just to us, but to others as well.

A minister in Australia shared this story about one of his parishioners. He had preached on the topic of using one's gifts to the glory of God. After the service a woman in her 80's came to him and asked what she should do. He told her to pray and to think about what she enjoyed doing and what might bring joy to others. She prayed and thought a while and realized she liked baking scones and in her china cabinet were a lot of lovely tea cups rarely used. Her home was

near a university, so maybe she could offer students afternoon tea. She got permission to put up her posters which invited any student to come for tea on Sunday afternoon.

For a few weeks she prepared her tea, and no one came, then one Sunday there was a quiet knock on the door and a young woman asked if she had the right house for afternoon tea. Welcomed, the young woman came in and was soon telling the woman that her beloved grandmother had just died. She was so far from home, and could not return for the funeral. She just needed something homey, familiar, to help her with her grief. She had come hoping that whoever was offering Sunday afternoon tea would welcome her, listen to her and offer her a place of solace.

Word spread through campus about this Grandmother's welcoming home and wonderful tea. It was the beginning of many Sunday afternoon teas enjoyed by students from many different countries over the next few years.

Eventually the woman became unable to continue offering Sunday tea and so reluctantly gave up what had been a gift to her and to many students. When the woman died, and the funeral arranged - the family and the minister wondered who might attend the funeral of this elderly woman. They need not have wondered, for the church was packed, filled by young men and women, some with their families, those who could not come sent messages of remembrance and love.

An open home, a cup of tea, a listening ear had brought hope, joy, laughter, light and an example of faith into the lives of strangers.

We, like this Australian woman, have been given the gift of redemption and eternal life through the death and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ, so let us seek Christ's light in all we do and all that we say. AMEN