

A Time to Grow: Light

March 27, 2022

Bendersville & Wenksville United Methodist Churches

1 Samuel 16:1-13

John 3:14-21

Well, friends, we are now more than halfway through the season of Lent. A season of introspection; a season of reflection; and a season of preparation. And this year, we are approaching Lent also as an invitation into a time of growth, in much the same way as a garden grows. We've been talking a lot the last several weeks about gardens, and plants, and how things grow, and what elements are necessary for growth...things like healthy soil, and careful planning, and thinning, or pruning, and water. We've talked about things that get in the way of growth. Sin, that disrupts God's ordering of creation. Things that clutter up life and crowd out space to move with God. Lack of water and nutrients that sustain growth.

Today we are talking about another necessary element in any garden. So, we could dig up some good, healthy soil, and plant a seed in that soil, and water it diligently every day, but if we stick that plant in a dark basement, it will rot. Plants need access to light. To sunshine.

And actually, for most plants that provide food – fruit and vegetable plants – with some notable exceptions most of these plants need full sun. They need to have access to the light pretty much all day long, without big buildings casting shadows on them, or other plants blocking out access to the sun.

One of the many reasons wildfires can actually be so healthy for a forest, is that over time the forest develops a canopy, where the trees grow thicker and thicker, and the branches grow closer and closer together, and the leaves are very dense. The trees are healthy, soaking up all the sunlight, but this canopy shades the rest of the forest so that the other plants on the forest floor do not get access to the same amount of sun. And therefore, they cannot grow nearly as effectively. A wildfire will come through, though, burning up a good bit of the forest canopy and thinning the cover, providing access to light for the rest of the forest. And that actually makes for a much healthier ecosystem.

So, here's how it happens – taking us all back to 9th grade biology class. The green parts of a plant (namely, the leaves and sometimes the stem) are green because they are filled with a substance called chlorophyll. Chlorophyll absorbs light, usually from the sun, and through the process of photosynthesis the plant uses the energy from the sun to convert carbon dioxide and water into glucose, or sugar. That becomes the plant's main food source.

Without the sun, there would be no food.

Some plants, like annuals – plants that only live for one growing season – are *completely* reliant upon the sun for their very existence. To the point that they can sense when the nights are getting longer and the days are getting shorter, and that shift will at some point trigger the plant into flowering and going to seed – basically taking up all of its stored energy. Once the seeds drop, the plant will die, but the seeds will ensure that the species survives.

Perennial plants are a bit different, though. Because instead of using up all of their stored energy to make seeds, these plants will take some of their stored energy and shunt it down into their bulbs. The leaves and the flowers will wither up and die in the winter when access to sunshine is less, but the plant will have stored enough energy and food to last it through the winter months. Kind-of like an animal going into hibernation.

Trees do the same thing. They will drop their leaves in the fall, meaning that the tree can no longer absorb energy from the sun. But, the tree has pushed its energy and food resources down into the trunk and into the root systems far enough that it has enough stored food for the cold months.

And then, there are other plants, like evergreens and cactus that never drop their leaves, and so they continue to photosynthesize year-round. That process will slow down during the winter when everything is cold and cloudy, but it doesn't stop, like it does for most other plants. And the tree or the plant keeps relying on access to the sun to provide it with food and nutrition through the winter.

So biologically, we as people are very different from plants. We get our food and nutrients differently. And yet, we are also heavily-reliant upon light.

The sun provides for us a major source of Vitamin D, which helps our bodies absorb calcium; leads to stronger bones, stronger immune systems, stronger musculature, and higher serotonin levels in the brain, which can reduce instances of depression and anxiety.

There is a reason that depression levels rise dramatically in the winter months. Death rates go up. Many diseases like the common cold, and the flu, and even COVID we see major peaks in, during the winter, when easy access to sunlight is less.

We need light to survive.
And in fact, we would go crazy without it.

I think I have shared with you before some studies that researchers have done on people who sit in places of complete darkness for a long period of time. And what they have discovered is that the human mind simply cannot handle complete darkness.

When exposed to the complete absence of light, the mind hallucinates, imagining light where there is none. Imagining that it can see, when it, in fact, cannot.

We cannot survive without light, any more than a plant can.

Our Old Testament reading today is really kind-of a weird one in the context of our topic for today, because at the outset it has almost nothing to do with gardens, or light, or darkness. But it is a fun story, and I promise you, it does relate. So, let's take a look.

At the time when this story is taking place, Israel is a relatively new country. Over time, Israel's story will go incredibly dark and bleak, and we will begin to see a need for a bright sun to come and shine some light into the enveloping darkness, and that's exactly what we get in the person of Jesus. But for right now, things are actually pretty good, relatively-speaking. This is long before Israel splits into north and south; long before the Assyrian invasion, or the Babylonian captivity; certainly long before Rome comes in and occupies Israel. When our story today takes place, Israel is young, and hopeful, and bright-eyed, and bushy-tailed. They are really starting to establish themselves as a country, and asking themselves "Who do we want to be?"

And so they look around at all of the other countries, and what they have and what they do, and what clothes they wear, and what music they listen to, and they say "We want to be just like them. We want a king." Never mind that God warns them that "a king is a bad idea, and will only lead you to heartache and heartbreak." Nope, didn't matter. Israel wanted a king.

And Israel had in mind what they wanted in a king. Young. Strong. Tall, dark, and handsome. A sharp jaw line. Football quarterback. Someone who would look the part of a leader. And so, they picked a man named Saul to be their king. And he fit the part. He checked all of their boxes.

But unfortunately, their "boxes" were not very well-thought-through. What they thought they wanted and what they actually needed were two very different things.

And here's the thing about Israel's relationship with God during this time in history (and let's be frank...I don't think today is all that different): for *generations* God has been trying, time and time and time again to shine a light on the people of Israel. To teach them what faithfulness looks like. What trust looks like. What relationship looks like. God has been revealing their flaws, and exposing their insecurities, in order to heal them and to transform them into the people of God that they were always intended to be.

But time and time again, the people keep turning off the lights that God keeps trying to turn on. God tries to teach them something, and they cover their ears and refuse to hear. Or else, they forget in an instant what they had learned 5 minutes before. The sun

comes out and tries to feed and nourish and sustain them, but they shrink away from the light of God's truth and crawl back into the darkness again, and then wonder why everything is so hard.

Saul serves as Israel's king for more than 40 years, but then, he starts acting as though he has no need for God, and God says "okay, I'm going to choose somebody else."

And again, everybody is expecting someone to be selected who is big and strong and tall and handsome. Even the prophet Samuel himself is looking for a leader who "looks" the part. But as Samuel goes down the list of Jesse's sons, from oldest to youngest, each one of them being a less-likely candidate than the one before, and God keeps saying "nope, not this one," Samuel himself starts to wonder "what is God playing at?"

Until he gets through the entire list, and the only one left is the son who nobody even bothered to call, because he was *obviously* not going to be selected. Shorter than the rest, younger than the rest, not as well-spoken as the rest, never having spent a day on the battlefield in his whole life, 15-year-old David – no older than today's high-school sophomore – was out trying to wrestle sheep into their pen when Samuel called for him.

And all of a sudden, the light went on, and Samuel can finally see that the least-likely son is the best choice. Never mind that it goes against all of society's "norms" and "expectations." Where God's light shines, no matter how weird or wonky or unusual it may seem, *that* is where growth is going to happen.

And here's the thing about God: God is fond of shining light into the strangest of all places. Onto a shepherd boy instead of a mighty warrior. God could have chosen to come to earth in a powerful king's palace. But instead, God chose to be born to an unmarried woman in a barn. Jesus could have exerted all of his influence over the rich and the powerful and the influential people of his day. But no. He called to the fishermen, and the tax collectors, and the sick, and the oppressed. He did call out to some powerful people too, but not many of them decided to follow. Most of them slunk back into the shadows.

But those who dared to come out and be exposed in the light of God's love and grace and truth? They grew.

The Bible is full of stories of God turning on the lights. It's no accident that the very first words we ever hear God speaking are "let there be light." I think maybe because even in the very beginning God knows that we as people are going to wind up spending a lot of our lives getting mired down in darkness. These first words don't just hang the sun in the sky. They are words that speak God's longing for us. God's intention for us. That when we are tempted to wander away from God; to refuse to follow God's lead; to insist upon our own way even when God tells us differently, let there be light. When we insist on fighting against one another; on having everything our way; when we are

tempted to believe that we and we alone have the corner on truth and everybody else is wrong and we alone are right, let there be light. When we find ourselves at war with others; when we turn on the news and all the news seems to be bad and it feels like there is no good left in the world, let there be light.

When we are sad, grieving, not at our best; when we are angry or confused or hurting; when we just want to go hole up under the covers for awhile and not come out and not talk to anyone, let there be light.

Light to light up the darkness.

Light to illuminate everything that is around us.

Light to help us see ourselves – and others – for who we truly are.

Light, in the presence of which darkness flees.

Light that energizes us, nourishes us, helps us to come alive.

Light that brings us out of hibernation and reveals the beauty hiding inside of us.

When the darkness of the world threatens to overwhelm us, may we take heart, knowing that God's light still shines, sometimes into the most unusual of all places. And where God's light shines, we cannot help but to grow.