

“Night Vision”

Psalm 119:105-112; Romans 8:1-11

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Fifteen years ago a plane crashed. July 16, 1999.

It was not just any plane. It carried John F. Kennedy, Jr.—“John-John” to people my age—and his wife and her sister, bound for Martha’s Vineyard airport. A nation and a world, as well as their families, mourned their deaths.

Investigators later concluded that Kennedy had experienced a condition called “spatial disorientation.” They believed that in the darkness of that evening and (due to the surrounding ocean water) no ground lights to guide him, Kennedy had become disoriented as to the location of the sky and the water. Up became down. Down became up.

Even with instruments pilots know that much orientation is visual. When flying in total darkness our senses can deceive us. Pilots can mistake sea for sky and ground lights for stars. Then, the only way to fly is to ignore what your senses tell you and trust the instruments.

Up becomes down. Down becomes up. Flying in total darkness. Sounds like life sometimes, doesn’t it?

Spatial disorientation is not only a pilot condition but a human condition. A too-quick decision to leave a job in a huff. Spending money without calculating the debt. Speaking or acting in a way that severed a relationship. Betraying a solid marriage for an interest on the horizon that was only a mirage. Maybe it’s not anything dramatic: just the ache in your heart when you wake at 3 a.m. You’re doing all the right things but life still feels empty. You’ve lost sight of the horizon.

Today’s scriptures speak to this spatial disorientation. Think of them, Milfordites, as two buoys that mark the channel; or, pilots among us, the two strips of landing lights that mark the runway; or the center and shoulder lines of the highway. Or as the instruments we need to fly

in total darkness. The first is the Word of God and the second is the Spirit of God. Let me speak about each.

The Psalmist declares in the familiar words we sang a few moments ago “*Thy word is a lamp unto my feet and a light unto my path.*” (Ps. 119:105) These verses of Psalm 119 present God’s Word as “Torah,” in the Hebrew, religious law. Note the use of so many legal words: “precepts,” “decrees,” “statutes.” “*I do not stray from your precepts. Your decrees are my heritage forever....I incline my heart to perform your statutes forever, to the end.*” (vss. 110-112) In the midst of uncertainty religious laws provide boundaries, direction and safety.

Not that they are always used this way. Some of us have experienced the oppression of religion and religious rules (law) when they are used as a substitute for God’s Word instead of guiding us to God’s Word. Protestant Christians, in particular, are tempted to think the freedom we have in Christ makes all rules null and void. But this is not what St. Paul says in his treatment of the law. He says only that law has its limits: it can only point out that we are headed in the wrong direction; it can’t give us the power to walk in the right one. But it can tell us what the right direction is, providing us night vision in the dark times and keeping us on the path in the light of day.

With so many here about to embark with UMARMY and their work of home repair, let me give a practical example. (Fire up a circular saw and then pretend it doesn’t work). Okay, this tool doesn’t work. What’s the first thing I should do? UNPLUG THE SAW! By the way, I was taught that if I was using a power tool and then had to leave it, I was also to unplug it then as well. The reason: safety!

Religious law—the Ten Commandments, Jesus’ Great Commandment to love God and neighbor, the commandment to tithe (give a tenth of our income to God’s work), the commandments to care for widows and orphans—all prescribe behavior that promotes safety, allow us to walk in God’s way, and that urge us beyond selfishness.

Yet law is not enough. We need not only the Word of God but the Spirit of God. Throughout today's reading from Romans, Paul capitalizes the word "Spirit" which means the Holy Spirit, the third person of the Trinity. The Holy Spirit is simply God's Spirit alive in the world and in our lives as disciples, so that the various phrases "Spirit of God," "Spirit of Christ," and simply "Spirit" all refer to the same impulse: God alive in you and me through the Holy Spirit.

Why do we need the Spirit? First, because living by the Word of God alone leads to legalism and its cousin, self-righteousness. Those familiar with Jesus' encounter with the Pharisees—lay religious lawyers—love to frown on them as villains because of the Pharisees tendency to confuse the rules of faith for the life of faith. Yet at times we are not so different from them. Whenever our church involvements are driven by something other than gratitude for our salvation by God's amazing grace, we are guilty of legalism that smothers the Spirit.

Second, we need the Spirit because it frees us to live in joy. Paul describes a freedom not only *from* something—religious rules—but *to* something: to walk in righteousness. Real freedom is not just doing what we want. St. Augustine said, "Love God, *then* do as you please," the qualifier "love God" making all the difference.

The Spirit allows our load to be lightened, our step to be lighter, our joy to be complete. It is experiencing in our hearts what we say we believe with our minds: that Christ's death on the cross *really did* redeem us from sin, free us from judgment, overcame condemnation with love and give us power to live triumphantly. The Spirit gives us power to walk in God's paths and avoid the spatial disorientation of sin.

By the way, isn't that what we want? For young Joseph, baptized into the life of faith. For our youth and adults who are not only working on houses but working on lives: theirs and the ones whose homes they will repair. And for us.

I do not see with the eyes of God. Yet I am confident that someone here is lost this morning, trying to figure out the right way.

And I am confident that someone here is regretting a past mistake and feeling stuck with the consequences. And I am confident that someone has been working hard to make things work and can't get their wings level. And I am confident that someone feels like down is up and up is down. The good news is that even though we get spatially disoriented, recovery is possible. In the darkness of our lives the grace of God provides the night vision we need to see that the best days are still ahead.

So use the two instruments: the Word of God that provides rules for holy living; and the Spirit of God which takes us beyond rules to joy. By these, spatial disorientation will become a thing of the past as Word and Spirit guide us safely through the storm.

“Thy Word is a lamp unto my feet and a light unto my path.”