

“Love’s Consequences”
Isaiah 54:7-10; Psalm 36:5-9;
John 1:1-9; John 3:10-20

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I am master of my fate, and captain of my soul. Some of you may recognize that as the last couple of lines of a poem called *Invictus*. It’s a poem that is a statement about how I’m not letting life get me down. In spite of the struggles I have encountered, I’m going to move ahead. I recognize that I have choices to make, and I can make them. So in that respect, I think there’s some real value in this particular poem by William Ernst Henley. But I wonder sometimes if we haven’t taken that idea that we’re masters of our fate and captains of our souls to the point where we kind of expect the world to change for us, because, after all, we’re masters of our fate and captains of our souls so the world should just work out the way we want it to.

I struggle with that, but I do think there’s a sense in which we do have decisions to make. In that respect we are masters of our fate and captains of our souls. It feels a little sometimes like I’m the master of my fate and the captain of my soul in the uncharted waters of tomorrow, so it leaves me with a question there. When those waters begin to get rough, like these days seem to me with the things that are going on in the world, trying to figure out how to make decisions and how to react to all that’s going on sometimes makes me wonder how much of a master of my fate and captain of my soul I really want to be.

But I yet believe that there’s an ability to make decisions. In that light, I want to tell you a story about light, and then I want to use that story to think about some of the ways the scripture talks to us. The story goes like this:

It was a dark and stormy night (or a dark night, anyway), and there was a Captain with his ship, travelling at a good rate of speed. He looked ahead and saw lights directly ahead of him, and he said to the mate, “Tell those folks to move 10 degrees to the south.” So the mate sent the message.

A message comes back, and it says, “You move 10 degrees to the north.”

The Captain says, “Who is this that’s telling me to move?” He says to the mate, “Tell them that this is a destroyer, and they should move 10 degrees to the south.”

The message comes back, “I’m a lighthouse. You should turn 10 degrees to the north.”

You see, we may be captains, but there are still things we have to avoid. There are ways we have to make decisions. We need that light, that lighthouse, to help us know that we should change course. I want to use that idea.

Oftentimes, when I think of Jesus coming, I think of him coming like a light turning on in a room. I'm not sure it always feels quite that way, so maybe this image of a lighthouse, of light that helps us find our way, is a better way to think of it. If you are navigating through shallow waters, you might want to look for buoys that have lights on them. The green ones you want on your port side, your left side. The red ones you want on your right side, your starboard side. Then you will stay in the channel. If you know that about the lights, you know where to go. I wonder if what God is doing in giving us this light is pointing out where we don't want to go and showing us where we do.

I think we've been talking some about that, and oftentimes we spend a lot of the year talking about how Jesus really invites us, shows us the way. In being the light, he not only shows us the way, but perhaps some of the time the light reflects back on us and we learn a little bit about ourselves. The nature of the Captain is reflected back on him—a little bit of arrogance there. But really, what I'm most interested in thinking about is what we learn about God. God is giving us the light to show us the way. What do we know about that?

When somebody builds a lighthouse, why do they build it? They build it because they care. They don't want these ships at sea to come along and become grounded, or worse, get destroyed on the rocks. Somebody cared. Isn't that what it's really about at the base of all of this? When God gives us the light of the world, the light in our darkness, it's because God cares. He cares about all of us captains out there on the uncharted seas of tomorrow who need to know our way. He cares enough to give us that light to show us the way and to guide us.

The idea that God gives us the light—Jesus says why. God so loved the world that he gave his only son, gave the light of the world. He came not to condemn the world. We don't put up a lighthouse to draw people in, but to warn them where not to go. He came not to condemn the world, but to save it, and for those who believe and trust in him, they will see the way. We can change our course.

So there are two elements to the love God gives. I think those are justice and righteousness. Justice is the desire of God not to condemn the world, but to save it, to heal it. We've talked about justice in that way. Justice is that desire to restore relationships, to make things right, to keep people from crashing on the shore. God doesn't want us grounded, or worse, destroyed on the rocks. God wants to keep us afloat, to continue to offer us the opportunities of life. The righteousness side of that is that God wants to show us the way. It's not only missing the shore, but then showing us the right way to go.

If we change analogies, when the immediate problem is that someone is hungry, you give them food. That's the just thing to do. But the righteous thing is to see that they can procure food over the long-run. It's living together. So what is amazing to me is to think about righteousness and justice as the characteristics of God, and these are built on that foundational characteristic: the steadfast love of God, as it says in the Old

Testament. Or as John says here, that God so loved the world that he gave his only son.

We spend a lot of time thinking about how all those things fit together, but today what I really want to say is very simple. It's that foundational piece of God's character, that steadfast love, that makes it all possible. Really, I think it is the reason that we have creation, that we are here, and the reason we get the lighthouse. We get continued interaction. God comes to us. When we think about the wonder of that, and that it is expressed in righteousness and justice, when we think about who God is and that God has done all of that, isn't that what Christmas is about is celebrating that basic foundational piece that God so loved the world?

He loves us. In spite of the rough seas, in spite of all the other things, we have a God who loves us, and it's worth celebrating. I know that it seems like dark times in some ways, and yet there is a light shining in the darkness. The love of God is still with us, and will be forever because God is with us and we can celebrate that. Amen.