

## **Blinded by the Gods**

Michael Jenkins

2 Corinthians 4:3-6

February 14, 2021 | St. Charles Avenue Presbyterian Church

*“And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing. The god of this age has blinded the minds of unbelievers, so that they cannot see the light of the gospel that displays the glory of Christ, who is the image of God.... For God, who said, ‘Let light shine out of darkness,’ made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of God’s glory displayed in the face of Christ.”*

*2 Corinthians 4:3-6*

They say that one’s theology never rises above one’s hymn book. I don’t know if that’s true, but it sounds about right.

There are lines from various hymns that have lodged themselves deep inside of me, that rise up on certain occasions. One of those lines, or rather just a phrase from one of those lines, came to mind this week as I pondered our passage from Second Corinthians. The phrase is from Isaac Watts’ classic hymn, “When I Survey the Wondrous Cross.” Just this fragment of a line came to mind: “All the vain things that charm me most.”

There’s a new British television production of William Makepeace Thackeray’s nineteenth century novel, “Vanity Fair.” I commend it.

“Vanity Fair” is the story of Becky Sharp. Sharp by name, sharp by nature, Becky emerges from the sort of cloudy semi-destitute background familiar to anyone who has read Thackeray’s neighbor Charles Dickens. Becky is set on worldly success and all that comes with it, and is willing to do anything and to use anyone to get it. Becky is shameless, utterly unencumbered by conscience, probably what we would call a sociopath today. But what’s really interesting about Becky’s rise and fall is that she merely wants (and is willing to do whatever is necessary to get) what pretty much everyone else in her society wants. She - like almost everyone else in her story - measures a person’s worth by the accumulation of status, wealth, beautiful objects, and so forth.

At the beginning of each episode of this new version of the story, Michael Palin appears briefly as the author, and he makes a little speech about the humbug and folly and emptiness of the society he calls “vanity fair,” “where everyone is striving for what is not worth having.”

The tragedy of Becky Sharp is that she seriously believes the myth of vanity fair, that the “vain things that charm us {its inhabitants} most” somehow really do matter, really do bestow value, and are therefore worth the price she is willing to pay for them. The outrageousness of Becky’s behavior is just the attractive packaging of her story; the sad point of her tale is that she is deluded, or, as the author of Second Corinthians might say, “blinded” by the “the god of this age.”

For all the insight of our passage from Second Corinthians, it also feels spiritually dangerous to me. It skates awfully close to the edge of self-righteousness, self-contentment, a kind of spiritual arrogance.

Yes, the author says, the good news is veiled, but only to those who are perishing. They've been blinded by the god of this age. We, on the other hand, know the truth. The light of God shines in our hearts.

Oh, my. That kind of talk makes me nervous. It does.

That kind of talk smacks of the self-satisfied religiosity that led one very religious man at the Temple to thank God that he is so righteous while that other poor slob next to him is clearly not righteous. They both prayed, said Jesus, but which one do you think God listened to? Jesus assumes we know the answer; it's a rhetorical question.

That kind of talk reminds me of the folks who arrive in heaven eager to get Jesus' autograph, but are told by the celestial bouncer that their name is not on the list. What was it that Jesus says about them when they catch his eye, "Sorry, I'm afraid we've never met."

Indeed, I do feel that there is a spiritual danger lurking beneath the surface of the words we find here in Second Corinthians. And it repels me because it is such an easy temptation for us, a temptation to feel morally superior, spiritually superior, to the sinner who won't lift up his eyes but mutters in grief, "God, forgive me, the sinner."

We were talking one day, a retired engineer and I, in a restaurant near his home in California. He and I had become friends over an eight-year acquaintance.

He was an acquired taste. Apparently humorless, highly opinionated, abrupt almost to the point of rudeness, for the first three years of our relationship, I suppose I only visited him because I had to. But something happened along the way. I'm not sure what or when, but at some point I realized that this profoundly odd man was not only brilliant (I knew that), but spiritually wise. And I found myself becoming genuinely and deeply fond of him.

One day we were talking about a news story we'd both just read. Someone in the public eye had said or done something really inexcusable — I can't remember who or what now — and they had been subjected to the kind of career-ending shaming that has become common in our strangely permissive but also strangely intolerant society. The person was, in other words, canceled.

My friend said something like this. What that fella said was awful. And he ought to be held responsible. But hasn't everyone done or said something they ought to feel ashamed of. We human beings are just a mess. We're all mixed up good and bad inside. And the folks who are taking such pleasure in tearing this guy apart, well, aren't they just as guilty as he is?

My friend's curiosity was theological. What does Jesus have to say about sin and sinning and sinners, in other words, about human beings going about the messy job of being human? Isn't it possible that we're all so caught up in the zeitgeist, the spirit of the age, that none of us is able to escape being blinded at some time or the other?

For a long time I talked about things I learned from my doctor-father, old Professor James Torrance. Recently I realized that I am now four years older than he was when I first met my “old professor” on the staircase at King’s College. But one of the things I learned from him was a lesson that helps me redeem this text from Second Corinthians with its beauty and its danger, and helps me have the courage to get up in the mornings and to try to be good.

Here’s what he taught me. Many Christians commonly believe that the only way to gain forgiveness from God is to sincerely repent. But Professor Torrance helped me learn that we human beings are such a mess, so spiritually confused, so morally blind, we don’t even know how to repent, nor for what to repent. As he often observed, one of the realities of our spiritual blindness is that sometimes when we think we’ve been righteous, we’ve sinned; and sometimes when we think we’ve made a pig’s breakfast of things, we’ve done some good. Fortunately, Jesus Christ has taken on our sin and repented for us.

The gods of this present age will blind us. They will spin us round till we are dizzy as a child stumbling off a whirligig at the playground. They will lure us with promises of fame, fortune, power, and all sorts of things. And we are going to get as deluded as poor Becky Sharp from time to time. And, sometimes, we are going to puff ourselves up with the gas of self-righteousness till we’re ready to pop. And the good news - veiled from us on our worst days and clear as a bell on others - is that despite, not because, but despite our best efforts, the person God is making of us is to be seen in the same place as the God of all grace and glory is to be found, in the face of Christ.

Amen.