

When the Lights Go Out

Jo Ann and Tony

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JO ANN

When I was a kid, I spent a lot of time at my grandparents' house in the woods. They had a regular schedule for their lives, and Monday was laundry day. I liked to be there on Mondays because my grandparents didn't have a washer or dryer, so grandma would make her weekly trip to the "city" to visit the laundromat... which happened to be next to the grocery store... which happened to be next to the department store with a great toy section that my brother and I would explore for hours... the change grandma gave us jingling in our pockets.

One Monday, the decision was easy... we had just seen something new advertised on TV... and there it was, shimmering on the shelf... **Lightning Bug Glow Juice!** We each had enough change to buy a bottle... and could hardly contain ourselves as we helped carry the laundry to the car and drove back to the woods. Once in the house, we rounded up some toys... paper, scissors, pencils... small household objects... and paintbrushes... went into the spare bedroom... tore the Glow Juice from their packages... and went wild! We would paint something... hold it under the light... then go in the closet to watch it glow in the dark. It was an awesome afternoon. After dinner, we got busy doing other things... then put on our pajamas, got tucked into the beds in the spare bedroom... and, when grandma turned off the light on the way out... all I can say is "Wow!"

There was light everywhere! On our bedspreads... the dressers... the walls... even the ceiling! Apparently we weren't the neatest artists... and we must have had it all over our fingers, too... because everything we touched was glowing... including our hair and faces. Not sure how the splatters reached the ceiling. 😊 We had forgotten about it... but when the lights went out, what had been hidden was revealed... the invisible became visible... and, oh my, it was breath-taking!

TONY

A number of things glow in the dark... jellyfish, a species of snail in Australia, zinc oxide... which is what they use to make those **glow in the dark stars** we passed out one time here... Malaysian mushrooms, wintergreen lifesavers, and **plutonium**. For 9 years we lived very near Three Mile Island, and I used to brag that we saved money on electricity. Why? Because we were so close to a power plant? No, because we sat at home and glowed in the dark." 😊 Well, of course not!

Jo Ann was talking about playing with lightning bug glow juice... we were playing with the lightning bugs... **fireflies**...themselves. 😊 Anyone do that as a kid on summer evening? Run around and try to capture lightning bugs? And try to figure out how they glow in the dark?

Why does *anything* glow in the dark? Because it has an inner light that is most visible when things go dark. And things have gone a bit dark in our world, haven't they? This virus we're protecting ourselves against is not the most deadly bug that we've had to deal with in recent generations, thankfully, but it's affected nearly every part of our lives now!... our social interactions, our jobs, our economy, and, yes, our church. 😞 It's hard not to be with the people we love. It's hard not to shake hands or hug each

other. It's hard to lose hours or jobs...to have businesses and schools closed... to see empty shelves in the stores that are open. **Where is God in all of this?** Is there any good news about this corona virus?

JO ANN

In my prayer this week, I kept being drawn to the word "corona." I said, "Lord, Corona means crown... but this Corona virus is not a crown, it's a contagion. In the midst of all this darkness, what do you want us to see?" And what He showed me left me smiling in wonder like I did that night in my grandmother's bedroom. I shared it with Tony... we did some prayerful study... and we're hoping that what we share this morning will restore a smile of wonder for you, too.

When the moon passes in front of the sun and blocks it entirely it's called a **solar eclipse**. It's a somewhat rare phenomenon... has anyone seen one of those live? The most striking thing that happens is that the glow of the sun's light extends out beyond the shadow of the moon... a circle of vibrant energy is obvious from millions of miles away. And do you know what the circle of light is called? A corona! Hmmm...

So let's look at the **word "corona"** for a minute. It does mean "crown." And so it's in the Bible. We did a scripture search and discovered that several words are used... and several meanings given... to the image of crown. A crown can represent:

Consecration: A crown was placed on the head to indicate that a person was set apart – consecrated -- for a particular calling... so the high priests and kings of Israel wore crowns.

Exaltation: Crowns also caused a person to appear taller... signifying that the person had been raised up... had elevated power or character.

Honor: Crowns also indicated the presence of honor (our theme for this year!). 😊 People were given crowns by others to indicate that they had entered into a special position or a new status... like marriage or old age!

Glory: Crowns were also given to those who "shined brightest" in athletic competitions... those who made the power and strength hidden in their bodies visible for all to see. So, Paul talks about the invisible, eternal crown given to those who run their races well, holding their faith and making Christ's power and strength visible to all throughout their lives... And in **1 Peter 5:4**, we read that Christians who lead well... who love and protect the people in their care... will receive "an unfading crown of glory"... meaning, not only in the next life, but right here in the darkened world... our character itself can shine and make the invisible God visible to everyone around us.

And besides the crown of glory... there are other specific crowns mentioned in the NT... like, the crown of righteousness... the crown of life. None of these are earned by us, by the way... contrary to what we've sometimes been taught. All of them are given to us... because we are human, or because we are in Christ. **Jesus, the One crowned with many crowns (Rev. 19:12)** has become our crown... our corona.
TONY

Yes, even those who do not know Christ have a corona. Psalm 8 says that God has ***crowned them [all humans] with glory and honor***. All of us!... sick or healthy, Christian or not, saint and sinner... were crowned with glory and honor by being made in the image of God, in the likeness of God, and also in the character of God... we were made to be *godly*.

But that crown of glory and honor is tarnished in humans because of sin... because our own choice to reject the love of our Creator... we have become *ungodly*. And that's why Christ has redeemed us, restored us, and renewed us... so that if Christ is in us, we shine with his corona! But as Jo Ann said, it's his, not ours... not something we earn, but something we receive when His Spirit comes to dwell within us. It is Christ in us who shines through us. It is Christ in US who makes US shine.

"Christ in us" is indeed "the hope of glory." It's not just the hope that one day I'll die and fly away and shine forever with heavenly glory. It's also the hope of all of us who are in Christ that, every day before we die, we will allow ourselves to shine with His glory... right here on earth, as it is in heaven!

And why? It's not just so I can look good or feel , or we can look of feel good together. It's so that others will see God's glory in us. Jesus told us that **He is the light of the world**... but He didn't stop there... He told us that WE, too, are the light of the world... Just like Jesus, we are the glorious visible presence of the invisible God... and He wants us to **Let our light shine before others**...

JO ANN

...especially when the lights go out in this world... like they have in this current global crisis... and folks can only seem to see darkness. Like the moon passing in front of the sun during an eclipse, even in broad daylight, **the moon's dark shadow falls on the earth**. And in a total eclipse, there is a moment when day is as night... when it seems that all light, all hope, the sun itself is gone! And yet, if we will simply pause for one more moment... we will see what we can never see at any other time... **the blazing corona of the sun shining in all its glory out beyond the edges of the moon**.

Can we receive the wonder and glory of this? That although God's people are always shining like the sun... It's hard to see that light in broad daylight. But, like in my grandmother's bedroom, when the natural lights go out... the spiritual light becomes visible...

There are always forces in our world which attempt to block the light... which again and again cast big dark shadows of hopelessness and despair into our lives, our world. And the corona-virus is turning day into night for millions of people right now because it's all they can see. But God would have us stop fearing the shadow... and realize that in this moment, we can see what we can't see at any other time... we can see the SON! Against the background of this darkness, we can see Christ's corona shining bigger and brighter than any momentary shadow...

John 1:4-5 NIV -- In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.

When the natural lights go out, we can see that God has always been with us, and hasn't been the neatest artist, either... because we can see His Light shining everywhere... and, oh my, it is breathtaking!

Psalm 139:11-12 -- If I say, "Surely the darkness shall cover me, and the light about me be night," even the darkness is not dark to you; the night is bright as the day, for darkness is as light with you.

Oh my, whether crowned with glory and shining brighter than the eclipsed sun's corona... or crowned with *thorns* and hanging on a cross under that same eclipsed sun's corona... God is still God, and Jesus is still Lord... the same yesterday, today, and forever. So let's take a moment to pause... and notice what has been invisible that is now being made visible...

TONY

So... **what is being made visible in us?** What is being made visible in our world in this time of crisis? We see all sorts of interesting behaviors coming to the surface, right? Some of them are awesome... people caring for one another in creative ways, people helping each other laugh... I'm amazed at how much humor I'm seeing on Facebook this week!... people gathering online, as we're doing here, people taking advantage of enforced isolation to re-discover their families, or solitude, or prayer. People expressing gratitude in the midst of difficulty. Adversity sometimes brings out the best in people.

But we're also seeing some of the other behaviors... the darker things that we try to push down inside of ourselves when things are normal but sneak up on us pretty powerfully in times of stress. Things that put that crown of thorns on the head of Jesus. They include...

- **Addictions and attractions...** which are really God substitutes. They're behaviors or substances we turn to when we feel like we really, really need something to make us okay. None of them work to heal our pain and make us well... but we use them like we use medication... to make us feel a bit better for a while.
- **Fears and anxieties..** which are always there but, again, perhaps more controlled, more under the surface, when life is normal. "Normal life" is scary enough, right? But when there's a global pandemic, when people are worried about their health, jobs, loved ones, etc... ordinary fears and anxieties can mushroom into something really dark.
- **Obsessions and compulsions...** which reveal our need for control. It's hard to feel powerless, right?... particularly if you're one of those who is used to being in control, or like to be in control, or would prefer to have more control in life... and that's most of us in there somewhere, right? 😊
- **Distractions and daydreaming...** an inability to stay present in the moment. Instead, some are dwelling in apocalyptic, worse-case scenarios, convinced that they're all going to happen and perhaps even forcing those visions on other people. Others are living in fantasy land, pretending it's not true, or escaping to some place in their mind that doesn't feel as scary.
- **Selfishness and division...** this is what happens sometimes when people go into survival mode. I'm going to make sure I have everything I need, no matter what it does to others! Or WE are

going to make WE have everything WE need... an “us/them” mentality that divides and causes people to do things they would not normally do.

No matter how we’re acting out... in ways that are healthy or unhealthy... each of these manifestations is begging the same question: **Do I need Jesus or something else?** Or, even, for some of us, **“Do I need Jesus AND something else too!”**

JO ANN

And this is such grace... to actually be able to see what we are trusting in other than Christ! It’s a great gift because when these hidden patterns and idols become visible, we get to make some **intentional choices** about what we are going to hold onto... and let go of... and how we will allow Christ’s light and life... and honor, hope, and glory... and peace, faith, and comfort... to shine in us... and through us... for the sake of this world that He loves so much!

Well... right now, the lights of the world are out... and, as the scriptures tell us... **this is the time for us to shine more brightly than ever!** This is the night for which we have prepared our souls over countless days... This is the moment to be who we truly are... This is a time when we need not fear what a deadly corona virus may do... because we are trusting in the greater Corona... the One who transforms death into life... and **who works ALL things, even this, together for good.**

There is a worship song I like, goes like this:

Look at the world we live today
Look at the hurting everywhere
Let us bring mercy and your grace
Overflow in every place
Let us be one with You today
And let Your glory fall

We will shine... Shine like stars above
Shining in Your light... Guided by your love
Let your fire burn in us... Burning like the sun
As we glorify... Show your kingdom come
In all the earth

Hosanna... Church... **let us so shine in Christ that others...** and even ourselves!... will be so full of wonder, and hope... that all any of us can say is, “Wow!”

Let’s close with a poem that illustrates this so well... and then a prayer...

“Lockdown”

Yes there is fear.
Yes there is isolation.
Yes there is panic buying.
Yes there is sickness.

Yes there is even death.

But,

They say that in Wuhan (China) after so many years of noise

You can hear the birds again.

They say that after just a few weeks of quiet

The sky is no longer thick with fumes

But blue and grey and clear.

They say that in the streets of Assisi (Italy)

People are singing to each other

across the empty squares,

keeping their windows open

so that those who are alone

may hear the sounds of family around them.

They say that a hotel in the West of Ireland

Is offering free meals and delivery to the housebound.

Today a young woman I know

is busy spreading fliers with her number

through the neighborhood

So that the elders may have someone to call on....

All over the world people are slowing down and reflecting

All over the world people are looking at their neighbors in a new way

All over the world people are waking up to a new reality

To how big we really are.

To how little control we really have.

To what really matters.

To Love.

So we pray and we remember that

Yes there is fear.

But there does not have to be hate.

Yes there is isolation.

But there does not have to be loneliness.

Yes there is panic buying.

But there does not have to be meanness.

Yes there is sickness.

But there does not have to be disease of the soul

Yes there is even death.

But there can always be a rebirth of love.

Wake to the choices you make as to how to live now.
Today, breathe.
Listen, behind the factory noises of your panic
The birds are singing again
The sky is clearing,
Spring is coming,
And we are always encompassed by Love.

Open the windows of your soul
And though you may not be able
to touch across the empty square,
Sing.

- adapted from Richard Hendrick (March 13, 2020)

TONY

That poem...and this closing prayer... are both posted to Facebook, in case you want to ponder them further. The poem is new but this prayer is old... from a collection of prayer in what's called "The Book of Common Prayer." Christians have been praying this a long time, and today we pray it with them...

Increase, O God, the spirit of neighborliness among us, that in peril we may uphold one another, in sickness and suffering tend to one another, and in homelessness, loneliness, or exile befriend one another. Grant us brave and enduring hearts that we may strengthen one another, until the testing of these days has ended, and you again give us peace in our time; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.