

"Let There Be...Life!"
By Rev. James C. Ramsey

Texts: Psalm 27:1-3, 13-14
John 1:1-5

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"Let There Be...Life!" That's what God says to you, to your family, your church, your community, your neighbors. The purpose of our existence is not simply "to live," but to "have life...and to have it abundantly. (John 10:10)

The first words that God speaks in the Bible are, "Let there be light" (Genesis 1:3). Into the darkness, into the chaos, God speaks and light appears. Light is the first of many things in the opening verses of Genesis that God declares to be good. In a world with so much wrong, where there is so much darkness, it is important to remember God's light, a constant reminder, every day, of God's creative work – God's gift of overflowing, abundant life. As each new day begins, the sun comes up. Light comes, life comes. And it is good.

Sunny days are welcome here in Pittsburgh, where it is so often gray. The same is true of life. Darkness seems to overwhelm us at times. We long for the coming of light to our world: an end to conflict, to injustice, to suffering, to poverty, to hunger. Beyond the news headlines, we, ourselves, cry out for light. We have those places and circumstances in our lives where darkness overshadows, persists, saps our spirit...and light seems far way, or it is obscured by some wall, some fog, some cloudy disposition.

The Gospel of John begins the story of Jesus with the hopeful words of God's light breaking in – light that was life...life that was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.

Jesus, the true light that gives light to everyone was coming into the world. (John 1:9)

Jesus would later say, "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life" (John 8:12).

This light of life is a precious gift to those who believe...and even for us, the darkness threatens sometimes – it might be during a particularly difficult and painful family conflict or it might be in the midst of great loss – it might be in a time of shame and terrible regret – or it might be facing a terrifying illness or injury – it might even be in the struggle of temptation – or the excruciating battle of addiction – darkness threatens sometimes – for most of us, at one time or another – but for some, more often.

May happens to be Mental Health Awareness month. I want to take a minute and acknowledge that. Pastor Jo and I are always thinking, in one way or another, about

mental health awareness...it's a significant part of our job as pastors. We believe mental health is essential to everyone's overall health and well-being. While we understand there is a cultural stigma associated with mental illness – we know that mental illnesses are common – and also treatable.

Most of us don't think twice about going to the doctor when we have physical symptoms – if we have trouble with our knees, we go to an orthopedic doctor. When we come down with strep throat, we rush to our primary care physician to get antibiotics. But so many hesitate to get treatment when they are feeling emotionally down, when they have crippling anxiety or debilitating depression. We know some really great therapists in our area, people we admire...professionals who help people back to mental health...they are healers as much as any physical doctor.

So much of what we all do physically impacts us mentally – it's important to pay attention to both your physical health and your mental health, which can help you achieve overall wellness and set you on a path to recovery. God wants life for us...abundant life, Jesus said.

Mental health professionals and physical health professionals are both realizing more and more the connection between physical health and mental health. Some of the best things you can do for your overall well-being involve not only eating right and exercising, but things like keeping a pet (one of the top things you can do for your mental health), nurturing your spiritual life, incorporating humor into your daily life, maintaining work-life balance, recreation and attending to your social connections, family and friends.

A healthy lifestyle can help to prevent the onset or worsening of mental illness, as well as chronic physical conditions like heart disease, diabetes, and obesity. Health professionals across the spectrum are much more attuned these days to the mind-body connection. For me it's all part of learning to be grounded – of coming to understand our place in God's world – the God who is the ground of being.

Mental illness is real, as real and as common as physical illness. Recovery is always the goal. Healing is always possible. Living a healthy lifestyle may not be easy but can be achieved by gradually making small changes and building on those successes. Finding the balance between work and play, the ups and downs of life, physical health and mental health can help us on the path toward the abundant life we yearn for and that God imagines for us.

Last night Pastor Jo and I saw friends at a wedding reception. They were telling us of a recent trip to Italy. They spent 10 days there traveling all over the country. One of their brief day excursions was to Florence to see Michelangelo's David – perhaps the most famous sculpture in the world. Someday I'd like to see it. Michelangelo, as I understand

it, carved the marble figure between 1501 and 1504. That's three years of chipping away at a slab of marble!

"When Michelangelo was just a little boy, one of his friends gave him a small Greek sculpture of a human form, half chiseled from the marble. For the rest of his life, Michelangelo kept that little statue by his bed. It was the last thing he saw before he went to sleep, the first thing he saw when he awoke. For him it became a symbol of man's anguished effort to be liberated from the prison of his own ignorance. Michelangelo devoted his whole life to freeing figures from stone. Sometimes it would take him months, even years, as with David. Always he began with a vision of the man or the woman locked up in the stone. He said, 'It is my job, my task, to set that man, that woman, free.'

It's what God wants for us...free, uninhibited, abundant life. Sometimes we have feelings of being trapped in cold, hard, dark stone. But Jesus is all about our liberation. That's Good News, for us and for everyone. It's light that shines in our darkness...and darkness does not overcome it.

We are called to be agents of the Good News – agents of the light. Pastor Jo and I were humbled and honored last weekend to speak at Deer Lakes High School as part of the *You Matter* Dodgeball Tournament! We were there to share a word of hope as part of the community movement toward mental health awareness – especially after two of our high school students died from suicide within the last nine months.

The tournament started out as a fundraiser for our youth mission trip. But after everything that's happened this spring, our youth decided to give the tournament over to the Boosters Unite group at the high school to raise awareness for Mental Health!

It's been a painful season for everyone involved. Dennis and Maura had unique situations, challenges and stories. But they had something in common--they mattered, certainly to their friends, family, school and community... but also to God...and they still do. Their lives had purpose and meaning, and they are loved. In losing them, all of us are diminished. That's what we said to the youth and their families gathered.

We told them each of us shines with our own unique light. There is no one like you— with all your gifts, your flaws, your embarrassing habits, your feelings, your foibles and your sense of humor. We are each uniquely and wonderfully made.

You matter. Each of us matters. Nothing you could say or do takes that away. Nothing can happen to you, whether you are a youth or not--- no secret, no break up, no abuse, no humiliation on social media, no unwanted pregnancy, no rumor, no failure or addiction or fear--- nothing can take away your worth. You are not defined by your circumstances or mistakes! You matter no matter what!

Everyone struggles. Everyone has rotten things happen to them. Everyone makes mistakes. Everyone deals with darkness. I might be doing great today, but in 6 months, I might go through a rough patch. You might be struggling right now—with depression, anxiety or other some other emotional issue, but things will get better. We have to help each other see the light. You might need me, or a coach or teacher or friend or neighbor to help you today. But I might need you tomorrow or next week or 6 months from now.

Remember, you're not alone...and your darkness does not define you. There is always hope. Healing is possible. The light shines in the darkness and the darkness cannot overcome it.

We didn't claim to have easy answers, but we offered to meet those youth where they are...sitting there, all sweaty, at a break in the dodgeball tournament! We offered to help them figure out a path forward. We can carry hope when others can't carry it themselves. One day, you'll walk out of the darkness and into the light. The darkness will lift and you will feel like yourself again. You will be liberated. There is always hope.

To remind us that the light always shines in the darkness, and the darkness will not overcome it, we are hosting a Bonfire Bash to celebrate the end of the school year! I'm not talking a small bonfire...I'm talking a big bonfire. It will be held on Friday, May 31st, here, from 8-11pm. All High School and Middle School youth are invited (and teachers and coaches too). We'll offer food and a chance to relax, celebrate, unwind ...at the end of an emotional school year. We'll offer the chance to toss a note or two into the fire, and set off a few floating lanterns filled with our hopes for an awesome summer.

You may be able to help with this outreach event. You might just be in prayer that it is a good and meaningful time that makes a difference in our community and for our youth. Or...You might be given the opportunity to be an agent of hope for someone who is struggling...someone despairing of the darkness...someone who has lost sight of the light...it might very well be this week, during the routine living of your life. You may be given the opportunity to witness to the God who first said "Let there be light," and who continues to say, "Let there be...life!"

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.