

OF LIGHTHOUSES AND SEARCHLIGHTS

*Across the sea in the dark of night,
Shines forth a ray of welcome light.
Tending the flame is the keeper's chore,
While the beam tells of life on the distant shore.*

*My spirit no longer weary and lost,
Yet I lament that there was a cost,
For the one before that had to pay
For the light that now marks the way.*

*At sea there's danger with an errant deed
For all those sailors who fail to take heed,
Of all that the lighthouse has to tell,
About the eternal voyage into heaven or hell.*

So read the plaque on the lighthouse wall at
the base of the winding stairs leading to the top of

the structure. I found myself looking at that plaque while on vacation this summer. We took a trip to the east coast of the United States and enjoyed our first walk into the Atlantic Ocean. Managing a good mix of fun and historical exploration, we had specific plans to visit a lighthouse. After a one-hour tour up into the structure, we had dinner nearby and then returned that evening to a dimly lit path onto the rocks outside the lighthouse. We saw the beam shine out into the dark sky over the sea, where a distant set of lights marked a passing ship. Undoubtedly, the lighthouse beam didn't have quite the same meaning to modern ships with all their electronic navigation aids, but it probably still stirred some thought in the sailors aboard.

For those of you whose knowledge of lighthouses is as deficient as mine was, I offer a few facts on the subject to make you more knowledgeable.

- They paint lighthouses with different colors and designs so that mariners who saw them during the day would have a bearing as to where they were along the coast. For example, a lighthouse with black and white swirling stripes would

tell you that you were near Cape Hatteras.

- At night, lighthouses use a unique timing of their flash to help in identification. For example, the Cape Hatteras lighthouse flashes a white light every 7.5 seconds and so on.
- Early lighthouses burned whale oil, other animal oils, vegetable oil, and kerosene. Lenses captured the light and redirected and focused it to gain visibility from greater distances.

The tour guide filled our minds with many other facts about the particular lighthouse that we visited, and a little about the lighthouse keepers. He also told us a story about a near collision off the coast. A radio conversation ensued when two vessels saw each other's lights. The one naval vessel insisted that the other change course to avoid a collision, but the other one said he couldn't do that. The first vessel then identified itself and again

demanded that the other change course. The other responded with “I’m a lighthouse. It’s your call.”

As we walked back up the path from the rocks that evening to our car, I looked back at the lighthouse and saw a single marker light high on the backside of the lighthouse. Of course, there were other lights in the parking lot, but that one up high reminded me of home. St. John’s has a tall steeple with a single marker light at its peak.

I thought about the time when a young couple walked onto the church property late one night. I saw them walk up as I was sitting on the front porch of the parsonage. Their car had broken down out on the county road and they were drawn to the church because the steeple marker light stood out so prominently in the dark country sky—just like a lighthouse is how they put it. I kind of like that thought. While we helped them get their car back on the road, I also had some time to just talk to them during the wait. I found out they were from out of state, and they were on the way to visit the young man’s grandparents. As it turned out, the grandparents only lived about two more miles up the road, but they weren’t able to get cell phone reception out here in the country. I knew that the

Bailey's, the man's grandparents, were devout Methodists and so I inquired of the couple's spiritual habit. The couple had just gotten married and moved to a new town and said they were going to go to the local Methodist church. They told me when they left that if they ever had a hard time finding the grandparents' house on a return visit, they would always look for St. John's steeple to help them find their way. How cool, I thought to myself.

I used that story of the young couple in a sermon once. I talked about how most churches make very good spiritual lighthouses. We have the physical structure, Jesus is the light, and the people are the lighthouse keepers. Scripture tells us where we should be in our journey, and it warns us where danger lurks.

We tried to get in another hour or so of driving before we stopped for the night. We soon came to a big bridge on the interstate, and we could see all kinds of emergency lights flashing on the edge of the lake that the bridge crossed. Police cars on shore were fanning their searchlights over the water. Overhead, two helicopters used big searchlights to cover the portions of the lake that the cars on shore couldn't reach. Since all the searching was

being done at night, I surmised that there was human life at stake. We said a prayer for a successful rescue and for the safety of those searching. When we had gotten settled in at the motel, I checked the news on the television, but heard nothing about the incident at the lake.

We arrived home late the following afternoon and felt glad that we had another two days of vacation to rest up from the rest of our vacation. That night I started thinking again about the searching at the lake. I also had concurrent thoughts about my sermon analogy of lighthouses and churches. Then it came to me—I didn't take the analogy far enough. While churches make good lighthouses, their light is coming from a fixed point. The vast sea of humanity has so many dark and distant places that a fixed light cannot reach. And that requires rescue teams to go out into those dark and distant places and shine the light of searchlights.

Sadly, I fear too many churches are content with being lighthouses, which again, in and of itself, is good. But what if the emergency authorities had said, "We've got our police stations, fire stations, and hospitals. If you're lost, come to us." Obviously, it would drastically reduce the chances for

rescue. Instead, they sent out teams with searchlights. To complete the analogy would require churches to form their own such search and rescue squads.

I need to finish the analogy with another sermon. And then I need to urge the congregation to take action. Please pray for lighthouses and especially for search and rescue teams with their searchlights. May your church endeavor to use both searchlights and the light in the lighthouse in its mission.

Pastor Arnold Schmidt