

If You Want to See the Light Go Into the Dark—Luke 2: 1-20 *(December 24, 2017—Christmas Eve)*

If you want to see the light, you have to go into the dark. You can't see the stars during the light of day. The beam of a flashlight illumines nothing in a well-lit room. Fireflies provoke no awe in the afternoon light. If you want to see the light, you have to go into the dark. That's the deep truth of Luke's story—don't look for God in a temple, a palace or leading a military campaign. When you picture the Messiah, don't fixate on a king, a soldier or a priest. Picture a saviour whose birth is witnessed by vagrant shepherds and suspicious foreigners from the east. Picture the Messiah on the run from the powers of this world: a refugee.

Luke is convinced that in Jesus, God has done something unique and unexpected. They looked to their scripture for understanding (our Old Testament) and suddenly Jesus' life made sense; he was the long awaited Messiah of Israel. But, they had a problem. The Messiah befriended sinners, he'd never lead a military campaign, he flouted the authority of the religious leaders and he was executed like a common criminal. This wasn't the Messiah most people were expecting. The Jesus stories, especially the stories of his beginnings, are a way of saying, 'look at this gift God has given us; you're missing it because of your expectations.' This Messiah, this expression of God isn't waiting for us to stop screwing up the old covenant before making an appearance; this is a new covenant, where God comes to us as we are, in the muck and messiness of life, to accompany us on our human journey. It was the poet John who put it more succinctly and beautifully; "What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it." It's the same message as Matthew and Luke and it's a rather simple one, 'if you want to see the light, you'll have to go into the dark.'

We know this already though, don't we? We might have a hard time living by it because our world blinds us with so much false light: success, power, independence, control. But, if we look deep within ourselves, we know; if you want to see the true light you have to go into the dark. My mother who grew up very poor, commenting once on how much is spent on gifts today, mentioned to me what joy there was for her in receiving an orange at Christmas. Gratitude and joy springing from emptiness and want. If you want to see the light, you have to go into the dark.

The spiritual writer and educator Parker Palmer says this of a very dark episode of depression in his life;

"Blessedly, there were several people, family and friends, who had the courage to stand with me in a simple and healing way. One of them was a (friend) who...stopped by late every afternoon, sat me down in a chair...removed my shoes and socks, and for half an hour simply massaged my feet. He found the only place in my body where I could still experience bodily feeling—and feel connected with the human race. He rarely spoke a word, and when he did, he never gave advice but simply mirrored my condition. He would say, "I can sense

your struggle today,” or, “It feels like you are getting stronger.” I could not always respond, but his words were deeply helpful: They reassured me that I could still be seen by at least one person, life-giving knowledge in the midst of an experience that makes one feel annihilated and invisible. It is enough to say that I now understand the Biblical stories of Jesus and his foot washings at new depth.¹

If you want to see the light, you have to go into the dark. The spiritual writer Anne Lamott shares this story in the voice of her recovering alcoholic friend and Roman Catholic Priest, Tom. It was Tom’s first AA meeting. He was going with a guy named Terry:

“Ten minutes before we began, Terry directed me to a long flight of stairs heading up to a windowless, airless room. The only things getting me up the stairs is Terry, behind me, pushing me forward every so often, and this conviction I have that this is as bad as it’s ever going to be — that if I can get through this, I can get through anything. Well, all of a sudden, the man in front of me soils himself... But, he keeps walking. He doesn’t seem to notice (or care). “However, I do. I clapped a hand over my mouth and nose, and my eyes bugged out but I couldn’t get out of line because of the crush behind me. And so, holding my breath, I walk into the windowless, airless room.

“You’ve seen the Edvard Munch painting of the guy on the bridge screaming, right? That’s me. That’s what I look like. But Terry enters the room right behind me. And there’s total pandemonium, no one knows what to do. The man who had soiled himself stumbles forward and plops down in a chair...Terry approaches the man who soiled himself. “My friend,” he says gently, “it looks like you have trouble here.” The man just nods. “We’re going to give you a hand,” says Terry. “So three men help him to his feet, walk him to the recovery house next door and put him in the shower. They wash his clothes and shoes and give him their things to wear while he waits, they give him respect. I talked to these other men later, and even though they had very little sobriety, they did not cast this other guy off for not being well enough to be there. Somehow this broken guy was treated like one of them, because they could see that he was one of them.

No one was pretending he wasn’t soiled, but there was a real sense of kinship. And that is what we mean when we talk about grace. “I was just totally amazed by what I had seen. And I had a little shred of hope. I couldn’t have put it into words, but until that meeting, I had thought that I would recover with men and women like myself; which is to say, overeducated, fun to be with and housebroken. And that this would happen quickly and efficiently. But I was wrong. So I’ll tell you what the promise of Advent is: It is that God has set up a tent among us and will help us work together on our stuff.”

If you want to see the light, you need to go into the dark. In the dark, the true light

¹ Parker Palmer, <http://www.wmeades.com/id220.htm>

becomes so much more visible. In the dark Mary, Joseph and the Shepherds see angels; in the dark, the wise ones notice a star. In the dark ordinary things become healing things—an orange, a foot rub, a shower, dreams, a star, a stable for shelter, a feeding trough to hold a babe, the words of shepherds that are treasured for the reassurance they provide, and of course a child. If you want to see the light, go into the dark.

That's where salvation is; we are not saved through success, control, independence or power. The angel gave the shepherds and us a clue, "to you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour who is the Messiah, the Lord...you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a feeding trough." We are saved through humble, vulnerable love, the kind that breaks down barriers, that calls us into community, that meets us where we are. The kind of love that meets us in the muck and messiness of human living and says, "I love you as you are; I just want to be with you, if you'll let me."

If you want to see, the light, go into the dark. Go with confidence, go with faith, the light is there waiting for you and the darkness cannot overcome it. Show your light, do as Jesus did, claim your birthright as a child of God, allow God to take on your flesh and the light that is in you will be the salvation of your family, your community and your world. If you want to see the light, go into the dark. Glory to God in the highest.