

Sermon for February 19, 2012

## THE RISING OF THE LIGHT

Marj Carpenter, past moderator of the General Assembly of our church, and our denomination's most avid spokesperson for missions, told a story years ago about a trip she took to Guatemala as a representative of the PCUSA. When she arrived by jeep in the village of her initial destination, she was dismayed when all the residents immediately ran for cover in their homes. They feared that she and her small mission team might be soldiers who had come to kill, rape, and pillage as they were wont to do. Such was the fear in which they lived. She was equally dismayed when after a few minutes a brave soul came out to them and said to her, "You must be Presbyterian." She knew she looked American, but wondered how on earth she could also look Presbyterian! "How did you know I am a Presbyterian?" she asked incredulously. "Because only the Presbyterians come to help us," the man replied.

Later that afternoon, she continued her journey, this time to an even more distant mission outpost high up in the mountains. The road, if you could call it that, was horrific, and the jeep broke down. By the time it was repaired, it was dark, but they forged ahead anyway, even though they had no headlights to guide them, and not even a glint from the moon. She prayed that the driver knew where he was going because on one side of the road was a sheer drop off to the valley below. Miraculously, after hours of bumping through the pitch blackness in abject fear of catastrophe they arrived at the mission site. It too was completely dark, but a person she could not even see came out to greet her and led her to an upstairs room in the compound where she was to stay. Suddenly, on their way up the stairs, on a little landing halfway up, there was a lone candle, whose light split the darkness and bathed the upper part of the stairway in a warm glow. What she remembered is that she had never been so glad to see a glimmer of light in her entire life, and how, like that candle, the Presbyterian church was providing a ray of hope to these brothers and sisters in Guatemala, whose lives were otherwise overwhelmed with the darkness of fear, war, poverty, death, and despair.

There are times when darkness does seem to be pressing in on us, and the world appears very black. Darkness presses in from misunderstanding, miscommunication, and misguided motives. Darkness presses in when we find ourselves under the assault of a life-threatening illness, or suffer the grief of a beloved relative's untimely death. Darkness presses in when war is threatened, when snipers randomly execute innocent people, and when a government turns against its own people. Darkness presses in when a father takes the lives of his two young sons, and when an angelic voice is silenced before its time. Darkness presses in with shadows from our past, with frustration with the present, and with fear of the future.

What I mean by such darkness is not the absence of physical light, but a density and a weight of hopeless and despair that is overwhelming, and a recognition that evil seems to

have the upper hand despite our best efforts to defeat it. I'm talking about what I once heard a Vietnam veteran describe as the velvety feel of darkness that pervaded that war, the kind of darkness that has substance to it. Darkness is feeling lost, losing sight, having no hope, hoping for nothing, seeing no way, and knowing no way to peace and joy. Darkness is doubting that another morning will come, or that another sun rise, will break through. We wonder if our effort is worth it, if there is any point, if the future holds any promise besides more darkness.

The disciples, especially Peter, James and John, shared this sense of night looming when they hiked up to the mountaintop with Jesus. Just a few days before, Peter had blurted out his great declaration that he believed Jesus to be the Messiah, the anointed one of God. But immediately afterward, Jesus began to teach his followers that the Messiah would have to undergo rejection, immense suffering, and death, before rising again. Peter was so disturbed by his Lord's words, and the prospect of them, that he rebuked Jesus. What had seemed like light to him had suddenly gone all black. Jesus was talking about losing one's life, losing his life, snuffing out the light of the world. Peter was afraid, and confused, and doubtful, as were all his companions. They knew the powers-that-be were plotting against Jesus. They sensed the gathering gloom. They expected that Jesus would overpower them. Now suddenly, they wondered if the future held any promise beside more darkness. How could they follow Jesus into such a night? How could they take up their crosses and join him on his horrific journey? How could they be expected to undertake such a journey, a journey into the valley of the shadow of death, without a meaningful vision, a promising vision, a bright vision of where it would lead? After all that they had been through with Jesus, was there to be no morning of joy and bliss? Was there to be only this never-ending night of despair and hopelessness?

The Hebrew word for "morning" has the sense of "to split or to pierce." It's a wonderful image, and it reminds me of Marj Carpenter's little candle. Darkness is slit open, pierced by the light of morning. Darkness, so pervasive, is split by light, and we see a glimmer of hope. And with that glimmer, we press on, knowing that we will survive, knowing that we will persevere, knowing that there is more to life than darkness, and knowing that the dawn is coming.

The transfiguration of Jesus was a ray of hope, a lone candle in the midst of the darkness bathing the disciples way forward in a warm glow. It was an affirmation to Peter, James and John, that indeed their master was the Messiah, the chosen one of God, light of light, very God of very God, to whom the Law (Moses) and the Prophets (Elijah) pointed. It was an affirmation, that the path to his glorification, and to their own, would be through the deepest darkness of night, would be through rejection, suffering, and death. But it was also an affirmation, that the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness, no matter how deep, no matter how pervasive, will not overcome it. To the early Christians, who themselves faced rejection, suffering and death for their faith, the glint of a vision of rejection, suffering and death transfigured into unimaginable glory and light, was salvific. It gave them the courage and the hope they needed to press on.

There is a difference between the climax in a tragic tale with its sorrowful ending, and the climax in a story, which though dark, concludes with a happy ending, where lovers are reunited after many tests and trials, or the true king is separated from all pretenders and

finally ascends to the throne, or, as in the Bible, the suffering and death of our Lord leads to resurrection. In such stories there is a sudden turn, a moment outside the narrative, when we get a glimpse of joy, and hope, and love, that lets an unexpected glimmer of light come through like that of a lone candle in the night. The gleam of that candle sustains us, and fills us with a sense that no matter how bleak the way ahead appears to be, and indeed is, a good and fruitful end is not only possible, but promised. Such is the transfiguration of Jesus. It is a climatic moment in Mark's Gospel that assures us, that not only is Jesus God's Beloved Son, but that the light of God's love will prevail.

On Wednesday, we enter into the season of Lent, to walk again with Jesus on his journey to the cross. It is a journey into night...into the shadow of death, into the darkness of the human heart, into the black deeds of good people, who so alarmingly look just like us. We can take this journey again, and enter into its blackness—into the darkness of human hearts and the darkness of our own hearts—for one reason. We have seen the rising of the light that is the Messiah, piercing through the darkness, and we have heard the promise that this journey through night is God's plan to bathe the world in saving, life-renewing, hope-restoring, dark-dispelling light. But we must wait. The time is not fulfilled completely. This transfiguring event occurs out of season, like a sixty-degree day in February. We must continue to endure grief, fear death, cope with despair, and live in and feel the substance of darkness. Yet, this event points us to a future that is glorious, that is God's, and that is ours, if we listen to Jesus. But it also points us to our Christian witness as disciples of Christ. We are the light of the world, given the privilege through our faith, of serving each other, and the world, as a gleam of hope. We need not dispel all the darkness, because we know that the time is "not yet." We need only split the night with the promise of morning, with the prospect of a new day, and with the hope of a future that is truly, glorious. So we say what we can say, and we do what we can do, awkwardly, but faithfully, "until the Son of Man is seen rising from the dead."

Dr. Mark P. Thomas  
Ladue Chapel Presbyterian Church  
St. Louis, Missouri  
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Transfiguration of the Lord  
Mark 9:2-9